

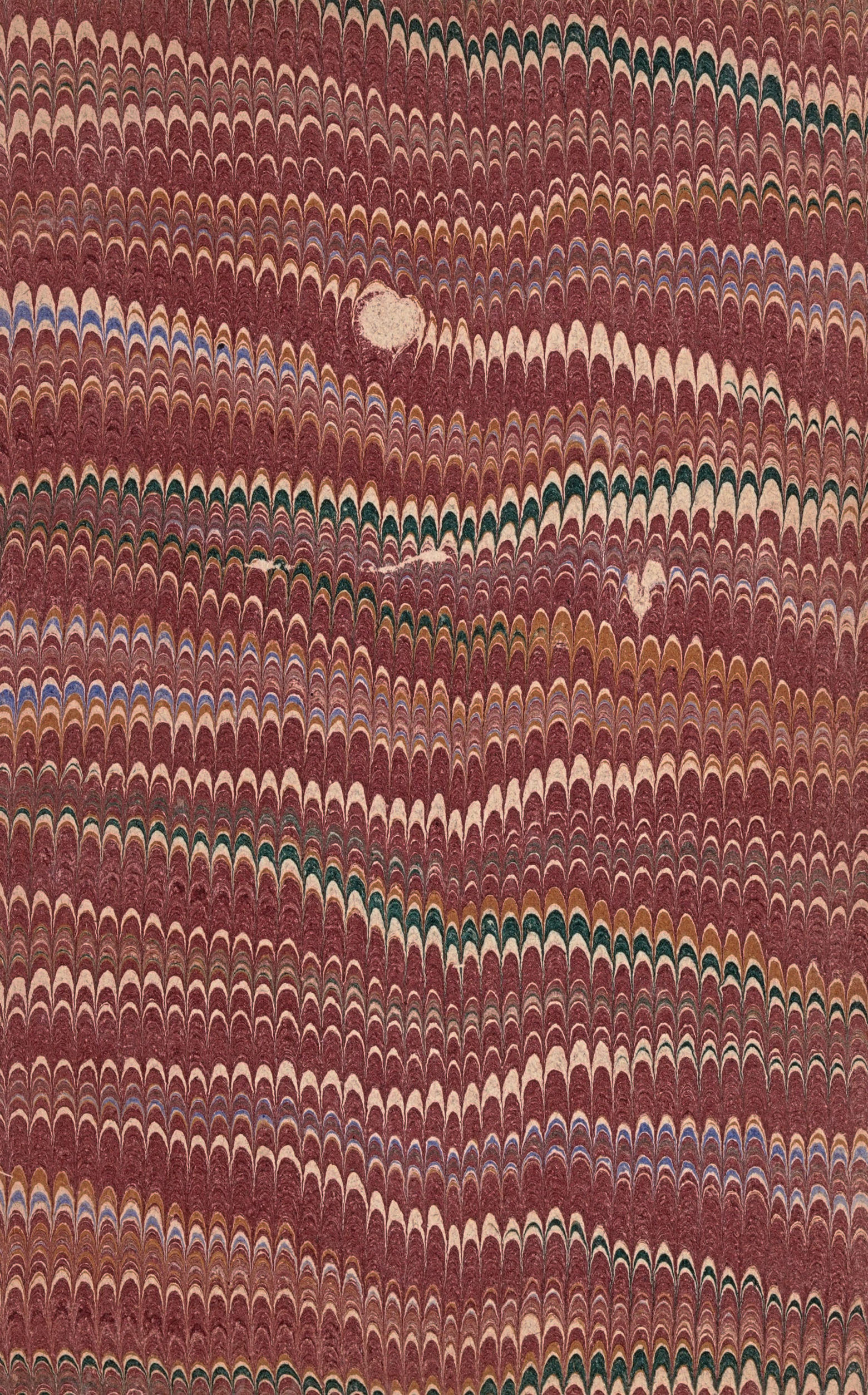


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THE
LAST OF THE AUCAS

A Romance

BY ✓

GUSTAVE AIMARD

AUTHOR OF "QUEEN OF THE SAVANNAH," ETC., ETC.

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EDITED AND REVISED BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN



NEW YORK

JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY

14 AND 16 VESEY STREET

(1887)

THE LAST OF THE AUCAS

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SCIENCE &

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GUSTAVE AIMARD

ATTORNEY OF THE "QUEEN OF THE SAVANNAH," ETC., ETC.

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NEW YORK

TROW'S
PRINTING AND BOOKBINDING COMPANY,
NEW YORK.

PREFACE

In the present volume GUSTAVE AIMARD breaks entirely virgin soil. He carries the reader from the flower-enamelled savannahs of Mexico and the Far West to the desolate pampas of South America. No previous writer has ever selected this country for the scene of a romance. GUSTAVE AIMARD, therefore, is entitled to the credit of having opened up new ground, upon which occur a variety of incidents far more startling than any contained in previous volumes. Moreover, the present work supplies much useful information about the natural history and resources of a comparatively unknown country, and thus affords an additional charm which justifies the prediction that *The Last of the Aucas* will meet with the same cordial reception that has encouraged GUSTAVE AIMARD's previous efforts at describing the novel scenes of daring, peril, and adventure through which he has passed.

PERCY B. ST. JOHN.

LONDON,

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THE LAST OF THE AUCAS.

CHAPTER I.

THE BOMBEROS.

THE earliest navigators, whether involuntarily or not, threw over Patagonia a mysterious veil, which science and frequent relations have not yet entirely removed. The celebrated Magellan and his historian, Pigafetta, who visited this coast in 1520, were the first to invent those giants so tall that Europeans scarce reached their girdle. These fables, like most fables, were accepted as truths, and in the last century became the theme of a very lively dispute among learned men. Hence the name of Patagonians (great feet) was given to the inhabitants of this country, which extends from the western watershed of the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean.

Patagonia is watered through its entire length by the Rio Colorado in the north, and the Rio Negro in the east-south-east. These two rivers, through the windings of their course, agreeably break the uniformity of an arid, dry, sandy soil, on which prickly shrubs alone grow, or dispense life to the uninterrupted vegetation of their banks. They wind round a fertile valley overshadowed by willow trees, and trace two deep furrows through the midst of an almost level country.

The Rio Negro runs through a valley surrounded by precipitous cliffs, which the waters still wash at places; wherever they have retired they have left alluvial soil covered with vegetation, and formed numerous islets covered with willows, and contrasting with the mournful aspect of the naked cliffs.

Monkeys, wild asses, foxes, and red wolves constantly traverse the desert in every direction, together with the cougar, or American lion, and the imbaracayas—those ferocious and formidable wild-cats. The coasts are thronged with amphibious carnivora, such as sea-lions and elephant-seals. The *guya*, concealed in the marshes, utters its melancholy cry; the *guacuti*, or stag of the pampas, runs lightly over the sand; while the *guanaco*, or American camel, sits pensively on the summit of the cliffs. The majestic condor soars amid the clouds, in the company of the disgusting cathartes, Urubus and auras, which, like it, hover round the cliffs on the seaboard to dispute the remains of corpses with the voracious caracarus. Such are the plains of Patagonia, a monotonous solitude, empty, horrible, and desolate!

One evening in the month of November, which the Aucas Indians call the "moon of the pruning," a traveller, mounted on a powerful horse, was following at a sharp trot one of the many paths to be found on the banks of all American rivers. This traveller was a man of about thirty years of age, clothed in a semi-Indian, semi-European garb peculiar to the gauchos. A poncho of Indian manufacture hung from his shoulders to his horse's flanks, and only left visible the long Chilian polenas that came above his knees. A lasso and *bolas* hung from either side of his saddle, and he carried a rifle in front of him.

His face, half concealed by the broad brim of his straw hat, had a sinister expression; his features were, so to say, modelled by hatred. His long hooked nose, surmounted by two restless eyes, rather close together, gave him a distant resemblance to a bird of prey; his thin lips were contracted with an ironical air, and his prominent cheek-bones suggested running. The Spaniard could be recognised by his olive tint. The effect of this face, surrounded as it was by long tangled black hair and a large beard, was to inspire fear and repulsion. His wide shoulders and well-knit limbs denoted far from common strength and agility in this man, who seemed above the average height.

On reaching a spot where several tracks crossed each other, the stranger stopped to look about him, and then turned to the right and struck a trail. Going further and further away from the banks of the Rio Colorado, which he had hitherto been following, he entered a plain, the soil of which, burned by the sun, and covered with small pebbles or gravel, only offered a few stunted shrubs to the eye. The further the stranger advanced in this desert, the further solitude extended in its gloomy majesty, and the footfall of his horse alone disturbed the silence of the desert.

Presently the traveller saw in the distance horses hobbled in front of a wretched *toldo*. At once a shout was raised, and in less than a minute the horses were unfastened; three men leapt into the saddle, and dashed forward at full gallop to reconnoitre this man, who continued his journey without even turning his head.

"Eh, *compadre*, whither are you bound?" one of them asked.

"Canario, Pepe," the stranger answered; "have you been emptying a skin of aguardiente?"

"Why, tis the voice of Pedrito."

"And unless some one has stolen my voice, my good fellow, it is I, the real Pedrito."

"Deuce take me," said one, "if I did not fancy you killed by one of those dogs of Aucas; ten minutes ago I was talking about it to Lopez."

"Yes," Lopez added in confirmation, "for you have disappeared for eight days."

"Eight days—yes; but I and my horse are hungry after a two-days' fast."

"That will soon be remedied," said Pepe, "for here we are."

The four friends while conversing had ridden on, and at this moment dismounted in front of the *toldo*, which they entered, after hobbling their horses and placing food before that of the new-comer. This *toldo*, as they are called in the country, was a cabin thirty feet square, roofed with reeds, and formed of stakes driven into the ground and fastened together with thongs. In one corner four wooden and leather benches served as beds for the dwellers in this house, where it was difficult to shelter themselves against the wind and rain.

Each man sat down on a large stone in front of a fire. Lopez took up a piece of guanoco that was roasting, and planted the spit in the ground. The four comrades drew their long knives from their *polenas* and began eating.

These men were *bomberos*.

Ever since the foundation of the Spanish colonial fort of Carmen, it had been found necessary, in consequence of the vicinity of the Indians, to have scouts to watch over their movements. These scouts form a species of corps of the bravest men, thoroughly habituated to the privations of the pampas. Although their services are voluntary, and their profession perilous, *bomberos* are never wanting, for they are handsomely paid. They often go twenty or five-and-twenty leagues from the fort, as extreme outposts, ambushing on spots where the enemy must necessarily pass. Day and night they ride across the plains, watching, listening, and hiding. Scattered during the day, they reassemble at sunset, though they rarely venture to light a fire, which would betray their presence; and they never all sleep together. Their bivouac is a flying camp, and they live on the produce of the chase. They have long been accustomed to this strange and nomadic life, and hence they acquire a fineness of perception almost equal to that of the Indians, and their practised eyes recognise the slightest trace on the lightly-trodden grass or sand. Solitude has developed in them a marvellous sagacity and a rare talent for observation.

The four *bomberos* collected in the *toldo* were the most renowned in Patagonia. They were supping gaily while warming themselves at a good fire, a rare pleasure for men who have a surprise to fear at any hour.

The character of these men is singular; courageous to a fault, they care not for the life of other persons or their own. If one of their comrades die, victim of an Indian or a wild beast, they content themselves with saying he has a *mala suerta* (ill luck)

These scouts were brothers, and their names were Lopez, Pepe, Juan, and Pedrito. Their home, twice plundered by the Aucas Indians, had been utterly destroyed. Their father and mother had succumbed under atrocious torture; two of their sisters had been outraged and killed, and the youngest, Mercedes, a child scarce seven years of age, was carried off into slavery, and since then they had received no news of her.

The four brothers from this moment became bomberos, through hatred of the Indians and desire of vengeance, and had only one head and one heart.

"What news, brother?" Pepe asked, when they had finished their meal, and Juan had mounted his horse to go the rounds.

"In the first place," the eldest asked, "what have you been doing during the last week?"

"Nothing," Lopez answered.

"Nonsense."

"On my word it is true. The Aucas and Pehuenches are becoming absurdly timid; if this goes on, we shall have to send them petticoats."

"What next?" Pedrito asked.

"That is all; we have seen nothing, heard nothing suspicious."

"Search your memory carefully."

"No one has passed, I tell you," Pepe remarked, confidently.

"No one?"

"Unless you count as somebody the old Pehuenche squaw who crossed the plain this evening on a sorry horse, and asked us the road to El Carmen."

"That old squaw," Pedrito said, with a smile, "knows the road as well as I do. Canarios, your innocence amuses me."

"Our innocence!" Lopez exclaimed, with a frown; "we are asses, then?"

"May be so. The old Pehuenche squaw who crossed the plain this evening on a sorry horse, and asked you the road to El Carmen," Pedrito said, repeating Pepe's words, maliciously; "do you know who she was?"

"Hang it all! a frightful old witch, whose face would terrify the fiend."

"Ah, you think so. Well, you are wrong."

"Speak out, and do not play with us like a cat with a mouse."

"My boy, this Pehuenche witch was Nocobotha!"

Nocobotha (the Hurricane) was the principal ulmen of the Aucas.

"Malediction!" Pepe at length shouted.

"But how do you know it?" Lopez asked.

"Do you suppose I have been amusing myself for eight days, brothers? The Indians, to whom you want to send petticoats, are preparing to deal you a furious blow. We must distrust silent waters and the calm that conceals a tempest. All the nations of Upper and Lower Patagonia, and even Araucania, have leagued together to attempt an invasion—massacre the whites, and destroy El Carmen. Two men have done it all—Nocobotha and Pincheira, the chief of the Araucanos. This evening there will be a grand meeting of the delegates of

the nations, at which the day and hour for the attack will be definitely settled."

"Carai!" Pepe exclaimed, "there is not a moment to lose. One of us must go at full gallop to El Carmen to inform the governor of the danger."

"No, not yet; we must not be in such a hurry, but try to discover the exact intentions of the chiefs. The chiefs who will be present at the meeting are twenty in number."

"Where will they meet?"

"At the tree of Gualichu."

"*Demonio!* it will not be an easy thing to surprise them at such a place."

"Hang it, it is impossible," Lopez said.

"Where force fails, try cunning. Here is Juan returned. Well, have you any news?"

"All is quiet," he said, as he dismounted.

"All the better. In that case we can act," Pedrito continued.

"Listen to me, brothers. I believe that you have confidence in me—and so quick to horse; I wish to be present at this Indian gathering."

"And you are going to take us——"

"To the tree of Gualichu."

The four bold comrades mounted their horses, and started at a gallop. The younger men blindly obeyed Pedrito, who possessed a recognised superiority over his brothers.

CHAPTER II.

EL CARMEN.

IN 1780 the Spaniards founded in Patagonia a factory on the left bank of the Rio Negro, about seven leagues from its mouth, and called Nuestra Senora del Carmen, and also Patagonia.

The Ulmen Negro, chief of the Puelches encamped in the vicinity of the Rio Negro, was friendly to the Spaniards, and, in consideration of a distribution made to the Indians of a large quantity of clothing and other useful articles, sold them the course of that river from its mouth up to San Xavier.

At the period of the foundation of El Carmen the post merely consisted of a fort, built on the northern bank, at the summit of a scarped cliff, which commands the river and surrounding country.

At the present day the fort is nearly in ruins ; the walls are everywhere decaying, though the dwelling-houses are still in good condition.

El Carmen is divided into three groups, two on the north, and one on the south side of the river. Of the two former, old Carmen is situated between the fort and the Rio Negro, on the slope of the cliff, and consists of some forty houses of varying height and style. Around them are scattered wretched huts.

The other group on the same bank, called Poblacion, is a few hundred paces to the east of the fort, and is separated from it by shifting sands. Poblacion forms a vast quadrilateral, round which are about one hundred houses, mostly new, only one storey high, tile-covered, and serving as a residence for farmers, agriculturists, and *pulperos*, or dealers in spirits and grocery. Between the two groups there are several houses.

The village on the south bank, which is called Poblacion del Sur, is composed of twenty houses, standing on a low soil, subject to inundations. These houses, which are poorer than those of the north side, serve as a shelter for gauchos and estancieros. A few pulperos have also opened their stores there.

The general aspect is sad ; only a few isolated trees grow on the river-bank, and the streets are full of a fine sand, scattered by every wind that blows.

On the day when this story begins, at about two in the afternoon, five or six gauchos, seated in a pulpero's shop, were holding a sharp discussion while swallowing long draughts of *chicha*. The scene is laid in Poblacion del Sur.

"Canario," said a tall, thin fellow, who had all the appearance of a desperate ruffian, "are we not free men? If our governor, the Senor Don Antonio Valverde, insists in plundering us, Pincheira is not so far off but that we may come to an understanding with him. Although an Indian chief, he is of the white race, without any mixture, and a true caballero."

"Hold your tongue, Panchito," another said ; "you would be better if you swallowed your words instead of talking such nonsense."

"I have a right to speak," said Panchito.

"Don't you know that invisible eyes and ears are prowling about us?"

"Nonsense," said the first speaker, with a shrug of the shoulders ; "you are always frightened, Corrocho."

"Panchito !"

"What, am I not right? Why does Don Antonio wish us so much harm?"

"You are mistaken," a third gaucho interrupted, with a laugh, "the governor, on the contrary, desires your comfort, and the proof is that he takes as much as he possibly can from you."

"Well," Panchito exclaimed, "after us the end of the world!"

"In the meanwhile, let us drink," said Patito.

"Yes," Panchito replied, "let us drink. Besides, have we not Don Torribio Carvajal to help us?"

"That's another name that ought to stick in your throat, especially

here," Corrocho exclaimed, striking the table angrily with his fist; "can't you hold your tongue, accursed dog?"

"Are you trying to bully me?" said Panchito. "Canario, you are beginning to stir my blood."

"Bully you? Why not, if you deserved it?" the other answered. "Carai, for the last two hours you have been drinking like a sponge; you are as full as a butt, and you chatter like a foolish old woman. Hold your tongue."

"Sangre de Cristo!" Panchito yelled, as he dug his knife vigorously into the bar, "you will give me satisfaction."

"On my word, bloodletting will do you good, and my hand itches to give you a navajada on your ugly chops."

"Ugly chops, did you say?"

And Panchito rushed upon Corrocho, who waited for him with a firm foot.

"Peace, peace, caballeros, in Heaven's name or the fiend's," the pulpero said; "no quarrelling in my house; if you wish to have it out, the street is free."

"The pulpero is right," said Panchito; "come on, then, if you are a man."

"Willingly."

The two gauchos, followed by their comrades, dashed out into the street. As for the pulpero, standing in his doorway with his hands in his pockets, he whistled a dance tune.

Panchito and Corrocho, who had already taken off their hats, and bowed with affected politeness to each other, after rolling their poncho round the left arm, in guise of a buckler, drew their long knives from their polenas, and, without exchanging a syllable, stood on guard with remarkable coolness.

In this species of duel the honour consists in touching the adversary in the face.

The two adversaries, solidly planted on their straddled legs, with bodies bent and head thrown back, looked at each other attentively, to divine movements, parry strokes, and scar each other. The fight continued on both sides with equal success for some minutes, when Panchito, whose sight was doubtless obstructed by copious libations, parried a second too late, and felt the point of Corrocho's knife cut the skin of his face its whole length.

"Bravo! bravo!" all the gauchos exclaimed, simultaneously, "well hit."

The combatants fell back a step, bowed to the spectators, sheathed their knives again, bowed to each other with a species of courtesy, and, after shaking hands, re-entered the pulperia arm-in-arm.

Those of El Carmen, the great majority exiled for crimes, have retained their sanguinary habits and their contempt of life. Indefatigable gamblers, they have cards incessantly in their hands; and gambling is a fertile source of quarrelling, in which the knife plays the greatest part. Careless of the future and of present suffering, hardened to physical pain, they disdain death as much as life, and recoil before no

danger. Well, these men, who frequently abandon their families to go and live in greater liberty amid savage hordes; who gladly and without emotion shed the blood of their fellow-men; who are implacable in their hatred; are yet capable of ardent friendship and extraordinary self-denial and devotion. Their character offers a strange medley of good and evil, of unbridled vices and of real qualities. They are, in turn, and simultaneously, quarrelsome, indolent, drunken, cruel, proud, brave to rashness, and devoted to a friend or patron of their choice. From childhood blood flows beneath their hands in the estancias at the period of *mantaza del ganado* (cattle-slaughtering), and they thus habituate themselves to the colour of the human purple. Lastly, their jests are as coarse as their manners; and the most delicate and frequent of them is to threaten with a knife under the most frivolous pretexts.

While the gauchos, on returning to the pulperia after the quarrel, were bedewing their reconciliation, and drowning in floods of chicha the remembrance of this little incident, a man, wrapped in a large cloak, and with his hat pulled over his eyes, entered the shop without saying a word, went up to the bar, took an apparently indifferent glance around him, lit a cigarette at the brasero, and with a piastre he held in his hand hit the table three sharp blows.

At this unexpected sound, which resembled a signal, the gauchos, who were talking eagerly together, were silent as if they had received an electric shock.

The stranger threw away his half-consumed cigarette, and went out of the door as silently as he had entered it. A moment after Panchito, who was wiping his cheek, and Corrocho, both pretending to remember some important business, quitted the pulperia.

"Hum!" the pulpero growled, "there are three scamps, who seem to be arranging some dog's trick, in which every man's head will not remain on his shoulders. Well, it is their business, after all."

The other gauchos, completely absorbed in their game of monte, and bent over the cards, had not noticed the departure of their comrades. The stranger, when at some distance from the pulperia, turned round. The two gauchos were walking almost close behind him, and carelessly talking, like two loungers who were taking a walk.

Where was Patito? He had disappeared.

After making an almost imperceptible sign to the two gauchos, the stranger set out again, and followed a road which, by an insensible curve, left the waterside and gradually entered the plain. This road, after leaving Poblacion, took a rather sharp turn, and at the corner of the path a horseman, proceeding to the village at a smart trot, passed the three men; but neither the gauchos nor the stranger remarked him. As for the rider, he gave them a rapid and piercing glance, and checked the pace of his horse.

"Heaven pardon me!" he said to himself, "'tis Don Torribio, or the fiend, in flesh and bone. What can he be doing there in the company of those two bandits? May I lose my name of Blas Sallazar if I won't find out."

And he dismounted. Senor Blas Sallazar was a man of five-and-

thirty, rather above the average height, and somewhat corpulent ; but, on the other hand, the squareness of his wide shoulders and his sturdy limbs indicated muscular strength, while his small grey eye was sparkling with intelligence.

He then led his horse to the pulperia the gauchos had just left, and entrusted it to the landlord.

This duty performed, Blas retraced his footsteps with the most minute precautions. The gauchos were ahead of him, and disappeared behind a shifting sand-ridge at the moment he turned the corner in the road. Still he soon saw them again, climbing up a steep path that led to a thick clump of trees.

Sure now of finding them, Blas walked on more slowly, and lit a cigarette. The gauchos did not look round once, but entered the wood after the man whom Blas had recognised as Don Torribio. When Blas, in his turn, reached the skirt of the wood, instead of entering the wood immediately, he took a slight bend to his right, and then stooping down, began crawling on his hands and knees with the greatest caution.

In a few minutes voices reached his ear. He then raised his head softly, and saw the three men standing together and talking eagerly in a clearing about ten paces from him. He rose, concealed himself behind a maple tree, and began listening.

Don Torribio had let his cloak fall, and with his shoulder leant against a tree, and with his legs crossed, he was listening with visible impatience to what Panchito was saying at this moment. Don Torribio was a man of eight-and-twenty, handsome, tall, and well-built, possessing elegance and nobility in his every movement, and with the haughty attitude which is produced by a habit of commanding. Two large quick eyes lit up the oval of his face—two eyes charged, apparently, with lightning, and whose strange fascination it was almost impossible to endure. His flexible nostrils seemed to expand through quick passions ; a cold mockery was imbedded in the corners of his mouth, which was filled with splendid teeth and surmounted by a black moustache. His forehead was large, his skin bronzed by the heat of the sun, and his hair long and silky. Still, in spite of all this prodigality of Nature, his haughty and disdainful expression produced, in the end, a sort of repulsion.

Don Torribio's hands were small and encased in splendid-fitting gloves, and his high-ankled feet were covered by patent leather boots. As for his dress, which was extremely costly, it was in appearance much like that of the gauchos. His shirt-collar was fastened with a diamond of enormous value, and his fine-tissued poncho was worth more than five hundred piastres.

Two years before this story Don Torribio Carvajal arrived at Carmen a stranger to everybody, and all asked themselves, "Where does he come from ? whence does he get his princely fortune ? where are his estates ?" Don Torribio had purchased an estancia in the colony, situated some two or three leagues from Carmen, and, under pretext of defending it against the Indians, had fortified it, surrounded it with moats and palisades, and mounted six guns. He had thus walled in his existence and routed curiosity. Though the gates of his estancia

were never opened to any guest, he was welcomed by the first families at Carmen, whom he visited assiduously, and then, to the great surprise of all, he disappeared for several months. The ladies had wasted their smiles and glances, the men their adroit questions to make Don Torribio speak. Don Antonio Valverde, to whom his post of being governor gave the right of being curious, had not failed to feel some alarm about the handsome stranger, but weary of losing his leisure in inquiries, he left the matter to time, which sooner or later rends asunder the densest veils.

Such was the man who was listening to Panchito in the brake, and all that was known about him.

"Enough!" he said, passionately, interrupting the gaucho; "you are a dog, and the son of a dog."

"Senor!" said Panchito, drawing himself up.

"I am inclined to crush you, like the wretch you are."

"Threats to me!" the gaucho shouted, pale with rage, and drawing his knife.

Don Torribio clutched the fellow's wrist with his gloved hand, and twisted it so rudely that he let the weapon fall with a cry of pain.

"On your knees, and ask pardon," the gentleman said, as he twisted Panchito to the ground.

"No; kill me sooner."

"Begone, villain; you are only a brute beast."

The gaucho rose tottering, his eyes were filled with blood, his lips were livid, and his whole body trembled. He picked up his knife, and approached Don Torribio, who waited for him with folded arms.

"Well, yes," he said, "I am a brute beast, but I love you, after all. Forgive me or kill me, but do not send me away."

"Begone!"

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes."

"To the demon, then."

And the gaucho, with a movement rapid as thought, raised his knife to stab himself.

"I forgive you," Don Torribio said, after checking Panchito's arm; "but if you wish to serve me, be dumb as a corpse."

The gaucho fell at his feet, and covered his hand with kisses, like a dog licking his master, who has chastised it. Corrocho remained a motionless observer of the scene.

"What power does this strange man possess to be thus beloved?" muttered Blas Sallazar, who was still concealed behind his tree.

CHAPTER III.

DON TORRIBIO CARVAJAL.

AFTER a short silence, Don Torribio continued—

"I know that you are devoted to me, and I have perfect confidence in you; but you are a drunkard, Panchito, and drink is a bad counsellor."

"I will drink no more," the guacho answered.

Don Torribio smiled.

"Drink, but without destroying reason. When drunk, men utter words, as you did just now, which cannot be recalled, and are more deadly than a dagger. It is not your master who is now speaking, but the friend. Can I count on both of you?"

"Yes," the gauchos said.

"I am going away; but you must not leave the colony, but be ready for anything. Before all, carefully watch the house of Don Valentine Cardoso, both inside and out. If anything extraordinary happens to him or his daughter, Dona Concha, you will immediately light two fires, one on the cliff of the Urubus, the other on that of San Xavier, and within a few hours you will hear from me. Do you promise to execute promptly and devotedly any order of mine, however extraordinary it may appear to you?"

"We swear it."

"That is well. One word in conclusion. Connect yourselves with as many gauchos as you can; try, without exciting suspicion, which always sleeps with one eye open, to collect a band of determined fellows. By-the-bye, distrust Patito; he is a traitor."

"Must he be killed?" Corrocho asked.

"Perhaps it would be prudent, but you would have to get rid of him cleverly."

The two gauchos exchanged a side-glance, but Don Torribio pretended not to see it.

"Do you want money?"

"No, master."

"No matter; take this."

He threw to Corrocho a long silk purse, through the meshes of which a great number of gold ounces glittered.

"My horse, Panchito."

The gaucho entered the wood, and almost immediately reappeared, holding the bridle of a magnificent charger, upon whose back Don Torribio leaped.

"Farewell," he said to them; "prudence and fidelity; any indiscretion would cost your life."

And, after giving the gauchos a friendly nod, he dug his spurs into the horse's sides, and went off in the direction of Carmen, while Corrocho and Panchito went back towards Poblacion del Sur. As soon as they had gone some distance the bushes in a corner of the brake were shaken, and a face pale with fear peeped out. This head belonged to Patito, who, with a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other, drew himself up, and looked around with great agitation, while muttering in a low voice—

"Canario! kill me cleverly. We shall see, we shall see. Santa Virgen del Pilar! what demons! Well, listening is a good thing."

"It is the only way to hear," some one replied, in a mocking voice.

"Who's there?" Patito shouted, as he leaped on one side.

"A friend!" Blas Sallazar answered, as he came from behind the maple and joined the gaucho, whose hand he shook.

"Ah, ah, capataz, you are welcome. You were listening too, then?"

"I should think so. I took advantage of the opportunity to learn something about Don Torribio."

"Well?"

"This caballero appears to me a precious scoundrel, but, with the aid of Heaven, we will ruin his dark scheme."

"So be it!"

"In the first place, what do you mean to do?"

"Really I do not know. I do not like that 'kill me cleverly.' Corrocho and Panchito are certainly the most hideous villains of the pampa."

"Caramba! I have known them a long time, and at present they alarm me but slightly."

"But me?"

"Nonsense; you are not dead yet."

"I am not much better."

"What, are you afraid of them?—you, the boldest panther-hunter of my acquaintance?"

"A panther is, after all, only a panther, and you can get the better of it with a bullet; but these two fellows Don Torribio has let loose on me are demons."

"That is true; so let us proceed to the most important point. Don Valentine Cardoso, whose capataz I am, is my foster-brother, and I am devoted to him body and soul. Don Torribio is forming some infernal plot against my master's family, which I wish to foil. Are you decided to lend me a hand? Two men who have only one will between them can do a great deal."

"Frankness for frankness, Don Blas," Patito answered, after a moment's deliberation. "This morning I should have refused; this evening I accept, because I no longer run a risk of betraying the gauchos, my comrades. The position is changed. Kill me cleverly! By Heaven will avenge myself. I belong to you, capataz, as my knife-blade does to its hilt—yours body and soul, on the word of a gaucho."

"Excellent," said Don Blas; "we shall be able to understand each other. Get on your horse, and go and wait for me at the estancia. I shall return there after sunset, and we will draw up the plan of the countermine."

"Agreed. Where are you going?"

"To Don Valentine Cardoso."

"This evening, then?"

"This evening."

They then separated. Patito, whose horse was hidden a short distance off, galloped towards the estancia of San Julian, of which Don Blas was the capataz, while the latter proceeded in great haste towards the Poblacion.

Don Valentine Cardoso was one of the richest landed proprietors in Carmen, where his family had been established since the foundation of the colony. He was a man of about five-and-forty.

Left a widower after two short years of marriage, Don Valentine had kept the memory of his wife locked up in his heart like a sacred relic, and devoted himself entirely to the education of their daughter Concepcion, called more familiarly Concha.

Don Valentine lived in the Poblacion of old Carmen, near the fort.

A few hours after the events we have recorded two persons were seated near a brasero in a drawing-room of the elegant mansion.

In this drawing-room, furnished in the French style, a stranger might have believed himself transported to the Faubourg St. Germain; there was the same luxury in the paper-hangings, the same taste in the choice and arrangement of the furniture.

Don Valentine Cardoso and his daughter Conchita were seated near the brasero.

Dona Concha, scarcely fifteen years of age, was exquisitely beautiful. The raven arch of eyebrows, traced as with a pencil, heightened the grace of her rather low and pale forehead; her large blue and thoughtful eyes, fringed with long brown lashes, contrasted harmoniously with her ebony black hair, which curled round her delicate neck. Short, like all true-blooded Spanish women, her waist was exquisitely small. Never had smaller feet trodden in the dance, and never had a more dainty hand nestled in that of a lover. Her movements, careless as those of all the creoles, were undulating and full of *salero*, as the Spaniards say.

Her dress, which was charmingly simple, consisted of a dressing-gown of white cashmere, embroidered with large silk flowers in bright colours, and fastened round the hips by a cord and tassels. A Mechlin lace veil was thrown carelessly over her shoulders, while her feet were thrust into pink slippers, lined with swansdown.

"Yes, father," said Dona Conchita, who was smoking a tiny husk cigarette, "a ship has arrived to-day from Buenos Ayres with the prettiest birds in the world."

"Well, little one?"

"I fancy that my dear father," she remarked, "is not at all gallant this evening."

"What do you know about it, young lady?" Don Valentine replied, with a smile.

"No, have you really," she said, clapping her hands with delight, "thought of——"

"Buying you some birds? You will to-morrow see your aviary stocked with parrots, Bengalis, macaws, humming-birds—in short, about four hundred specimens, you ungrateful little chit."

"Oh, how good you are, father, and how I love you!" the girl replied, throwing her arms round his neck, and embracing him several times.

"Enough, enough, madcap! Do you want to stifle me with your caresses?"

"What can I do to requite your kindness?"

"Poor dear, I have only you to love now."

"Say 'adore,' my darling father; for it is adoration you feel for me."

"And yet," Don Valentine said, with a gentle accent of reproach, "you do not fear, naughty girl, to cause me anxiety."

"I?" Concha asked, with an internal tremor.

"Come, child, a father's eyes can read the heart of a girl of fifteen, and for some days past, if I am not mistaken, I have not been the sole object of your thoughts."

"That is true," the girl replied, with a certain amount of resolution.

"And whom are you dreaming of, little maid?"

"Of Don Torribio Carvajal."

"Ah!" the father cried, in a choking voice; "and do you love him?"

"No," she answered. "Listen, father, I will conceal nothing from you. No, I do not love Don Torribio, still he occupies my thoughts; why, I cannot say, but his look troubles and fascinates me, his voice causes me pain; he is handsome, his manners are elegant and noble, he has everything belonging to a gentleman of high caste, and yet something in him, something checks me, and inspires me with invincible repugnance."

"You romantic girl!"

"Laugh at me, ridicule me, if you will," she said; "but shall I confess all to you, father?"

"Speak with confidence."

"Well, I have a presentiment that this man will be dangerous to me."

"Child," Don Valentine replied, as he kissed her forehead, "what can he do to you?"

"I do not know; but I am afraid."

"You are losing your head, and taking pleasure in creating chimeras."

At the same moment a man-servant announced Don Torribio Carvajal. The young man was dressed in the latest Parisian fashion.

Father and daughter started.

Don Torribio walked up to Dona Concha, bowed gracefully, and offered her a superb bouquet of exotic flowers. She thanked him with

a smile, took the bouquet, and, almost without looking at it, laid it on a table.

In succession were announced the governor, Don Antonio Valverde, accompanied by his whole staff, and two or three other families, or altogether some fifteen persons. By degrees the conversation grew animated.

"Well, colonel," Don Valentine asked, "what news?"

"Our great Rosas," the colonel answered, who was stifling in his uniform, "has again defeated Oribe's Unitarian savages."

"Heaven be praised! perhaps that victory will procure us a little tranquillity."

"Yes," a colonist remarked; "communications are becoming difficult."

"Can the Indians be stirring?" a merchant asked, anxiously, on hearing the observation.

"Oh!" the stout commandant interrupted, "there is no danger; the last lesson they received was a rude one."

An almost invisible smile played round Don Torribio's lips.

"In case of an invasion, do you consider them capable of seriously troubling the colony?"

"Hum!" Don Antonio answered, "take them altogether they are poor scrubs."

The young man smiled in a sinister manner.

"Excellency," he said, "I am of your opinion; I believe the Indians will do well in remaining at home."

"I should think so," the commandant exclaimed.

"Senorita," Don Torribio said, turning to Dona Concha, "would it be too great a favour to ask you to sing that delicious air from the Black Domino which you sang so exquisitely the other evening?"

The young lady, without further pressing, sat down to the pianoforte, and sang in a pure voice.

"I heard that sung in Paris by Madame Damoreau, a nightingale who has flown away, and I cannot say which of you displays more grace or simplicity."

"Don Torribio," Dona Concha answered, "you have lived too long in France. You have come back a detestable flatterer."

"Bravo!" the governor said, with a hearty laugh. "You see, Don Torribio, that our creoles are equal to the Parisian ladies in repartee."

"Incontestably, colonel," the young man replied; "but leave me alone," he added, "I shall soon take my revenge."

And he gave Dona Concha a look that made her shudder.

"I trust, Don Torribio," the governor said, "that you will be present to-morrow at the *Te Deum*."

"Impossible, colonel; this very evening I start on a compulsory journey."

"What, another of your mysterious excursions?"

"Yes, but this one will not be long."

"All the better."

"*Quien sabe?*" the young man murmured.

Dona Concha, who had heard the last words, was not mistress of her terror.

The visitors took leave one after the other, and Don Torribio Carvajal was at length left alone with his host.

"Senorita," he said, on taking leave, "I am setting out on a journey in which I shall doubtless incur great dangers. May I hope that you will deign to remember me in your prayers?"

Concha looked at him for a moment, and replied, with a frankness which was natural to her—

"Senor caballero, I cannot pray for the success of a mysterious expedition."

"Thanks for your frankness, mademoiselle," Don Torribio answered. "I shall not forget your words."

And after the customary compliments he retired.

"The capataz of San Julian, Don Blas Sallazar, wishes to speak with Senor Don Valentine Cardoso on important business."

"Let him come in," Don Valentine said to the servant who had announced the capataz. "Conchita, come and sit by my side on this sofa."

"Proud girl," said Don Torribio (who was extremely agitated when he left the house), in a hollow and terrible voice, "I shall punish you for your disdain."

Then, wrapping himself in his cloak, he went at a rapid pace to a house situated a short distance off, where he generally lived when at Carmen.

Twenty minutes later the gate opened again to let two horsemen pass out.

"Master, where are we going?" one asked.

"To the tree of Gualichu," the other replied; and added in a whisper, "to seek vengeance."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TREE OF GUALICHU.

As a general rule, the Southern natives have a divinity, or, to speak more correctly, a genius, sometimes benevolent, but more frequently maleficent, and their worship is less veneration than fear. This genius is called Achellenat Kanet by the Patagonians, Quecuba by the Aucas, and Gualichu by the Puelches. And, as the latter have more especially traversed the country in which the sacred tree stands, they have

perpetuated the name of their evil genius by giving it to the tree, to which they attribute the same power.

The belief in Gualichu dates back to the most remote antiquity on the pampas.

This wicked god is simply a stunted tree, which, if mingled with other trees, would not have attracted attention, but which alone, and as it were lost in the immensity of the plains, serves as a beacon to the traveller wearied by a long journey across the oceans of sand. It rises to a height of thirty-five or forty feet, all twisted and prickly, and its withered trunk is rounded into a large cavity, in which men and women lay their presents in tobacco, beads, and corn. It is several centuries old, and belongs to that species of the acacia family which the Hispano-Americans designate by the name of *Algarobo*.

The wandering hordes of Indians, doubtless struck by the solitude of this tree in the midst of the deserts, constituted it the object of their worship. In fact, its branches are covered with various offerings, many of some value; here a poncho, there a manta; further on, woollen or cotton ribbons; while on all sides garments, more or less injured and torn by the wind, are affixed to the thorns, which give this sacred tree the appearance of an old-clothes' shop. No Indian, whether Aucas, Patagonian, Puelche, or Tehuette, would venture to pass it without leaving something; and the man who has nothing else cuts off his horse's mane and fastens it to the tree. The most precious offering in the sight of the Indians is that of their horse, and hence the great number of slaughtered horses round the tree attests the vitality of their faith.

The religion of the Southern natives, thoroughly primitive and spared by the conquest, does not take the moral being into account, and is only arrested by accidents of Nature, of which it makes gods. These people strive to make the deserts, where fatigue and thirst produce death, and the rivers that may swallow them up, favourable to them.

At the foot of the tree of Gualichu, a few hours after the events already narrated, a strange scene was taking place, rendered still more striking by the density of the darkness, and by the storm which was approaching. Heavy black clouds rolled athwart the sky; the wind blew in gusts with a shrill whistle, and large drops of rain fell on the sand.

Around the sacred tree the Indians had improvised a village composed of some forty huts. Before each toldo crackled a bright fire, round which two or three Indian squaws were crouching to warm themselves, without taking their eye off the hobbled horses.

An immense fire, resembling a funereal pyre, flamed a few paces from the tree of Gualichu, and was surrounded by twenty Indians, whose grand war-paint led to the supposition that they were preparing for an important ceremony.

Suddenly a shrill whistle cleft the air, and announced the arrival of two horsemen; one of them dismounted, threw his horse's bridle to his comrade, and walked into the circle formed by the warriors.

"I salute my brothers," he said, looking round him; "may Gualichu protect them!"

"Salutation to Pincheira," the Indians responded.

"Are all the chiefs assembled?" he continued.

"All," a voice replied, "with the exception of Nocobotha, the grand toqui of the Aucas."

"He will not be long; let us wait."

The silence had been scarce established ere a second whistle was heard, and two other horsemen entered the circle of light projected by the fires.

Only one man dismounted. He was tall and fierce-looking, and dressed in the costume of the Aucas warriors, the most civilised and intelligent Indian nation in the whole of South America.

This warrior was one of the most perfect types of his indomitable race; all his features bore the distinctive character of the haughty Incas, who were so long masters of Peru. His costume, differing from that of the Patagonians, who employ the skins of beasts, was composed of woollen cloth striped with silver. A blue *chaman* covered his body from the waist, where it was fastened with a woollen girdle, down to the knee, in this way exactly resembling the *chilipa* of the gauchos, who borrowed from the Indians this garment and the short blue and red striped poncho; his boots, armed with silver spurs, and cleverly sewn with the tendons of animals, were made of the tanned hide of the *guemul*, a species of llama; his hair was divided at the back of the head into three tails, fastened together at the end with a tuft of wool, while in front the rest of his hair was raised and fastened with a blue ribbon, which, after three turns, fell on one side, and terminated in small pieces of rolled-up silver. His brow was girt by a circle of massive gold, a species of diadem, three inches in width, and in the centre of which sparkled a sun composed of precious stones; a diamond of enormous value hung from each of his ears; his cloak of guanaco skins, which fell down to the ground, was held on his shoulders by a silk cord, and was fastened with a diamond. Two six-chambered revolvers glistened in his waist-belt; on his right hip hung a machete, or short sabre with a very wide blade, and he held in his hand a double-barrelled rifle.

His arrival created a lively sensation among the chiefs; all bowed before him respectfully, while murmuring with delight—

"Nocobotha! Nocobotha!"

"The nacurulu has sung twice," he began; "the osprey of the Rio Negro has raised its melancholy cry; the night is drawing in. What have the chiefs of the great nations resolved?"

"It would be useful, I think," one of the Indians answered, "to implore the protection of Gualichu for the council."

"The advice of my brother, Metipan, is wise. Let the matchi be warned."

While a chief went off to fetch the matchi, or sorcerer, another chief quitted the circle, went up to Nocobotha, whispered something to him, and then returned to his place. The toqui at once shouted in a loud and menacing voice—

"A traitor is among us! Attention, brothers!"

A shudder of passion ran through the anks.

"He must die!" they shouted unanimously.

"It is well," Nocobotha answers.

On hearing these words, a man, clothed like the other chiefs, suddenly bounded out of the circle, and uttered three different times the hoarse croak of the urubus. He leant against the trunk of the tree of Gualichu, and with his legs apart, and a pistol in each hand, waited. This man was Pedrito, the bombero.

A living wall, formed of hundreds of Indians, rose in arms before him and menaced him from all sides. Pedrito, to whom flight was impossible, frowned, gnashed his teeth, and foamed with rage.

"I am waiting for you, dogs!" he yelled.

"Forward! forward!" the Indians shouted.

"Silence!" Nocobotha ordered, in a rough voice. "I wish to question him."

"What good is it?" Pincheira remarked. "He is a rat of the pampa—a bombero. I recognise him. Let us kill him at once."

"A bombero!" the Indians yelled anew. "Death to him! death!"

"Silence!" said Nocobotha; "who dares to interrupt?"

At the command of the master silence was re-established.

"Who are you?" the toqui asked.

Pedrito replied with a grin, and crossing his arms, though he did not let go his pistols.

"Answer, if you would not die; you are in my power."

"A brave man only belongs to himself."

"Surrender, and no harm will be done you."

"A bombero never surrenders."

"Why did you introduce yourself among us?"

"Canario! I came to learn the object of this nocturnal meeting."

"You are frank, at any rate, but resistance would be useless, so surrender."

"Are you mad, my master?"

"Forward!" Nocobotha shouted to the Indians.

The latter rushed on. Two pistol shots were fired, and two Indians writhed on the sand. While the others hesitated, Pedrito returned his pistols to his belt, and drew his machete.

"Way, way!"

And Pedrito dashed at the Indians, hitting right and left. Nocobotha threw himself in his path, with the roar of a lion.

"Ah, ah!" said the bombero, "my worthy chief with the diamond sun, it is our turn."

All at once three shots were fired behind the Indians, and three horsemen dashed upon them, scattering terror and death. The Indians, not knowing how many enemies they had to contend with, began dispersing in all directions, with the exception of the more resolute, who held their ground and continued to resist the assailants.

The three bomberos, summoned by the hoarse croaking of Pedrito, had hastened up to their brother; they helped him to get on to the saddle of the horse they had brought up for him.

"Ah!" they shouted, "down with the Indian dogs!"

Nocobotha dealt the Spaniard a blow with the machete, to which he responded by a cut that scarred his adversary's face.

"Eh!" the bombero said to him, "I shall recognise you if ever we meet again."

"Villain!" the chief said, as he fired a pistol at him.

"He has killed me," said Pedrito, in a faint voice. "Brothers, do not leave my corpse to them."

But the Indians, when the first moment of panic had passed, being able to count their enemies, returned to the charge, and threatened to overwhelm them by their numbers. The position was horrible, and Pedrito shouted—

"Fly! Leave me alone here; in a few minutes I shall be dead."

"No!" they replied, "we will all get away or perish together."

The fight meanwhile was going on two yards at the most from the tree of Gualichu. Pedrito, while his brothers were defending themselves, slipped down to the ground, and when the bomberos turned round they found his horse without its rider. Pedrito had disappeared.

"He is dead; what is to be done?"

"Obey him, as we were unable to save him," Juan answered.

"Forward, then."

And all three, tearing up their horses' sides with their spurs, bounded into the thick of the Indians. The collision was terrible; still, a few seconds later, the bomberos, saved by their incredible audacity, were flying like the wind in three different directions.

The Indians recognised the inutility of a pursuit, so they contented themselves with picking up their dead and counting the wounded, altogether some thirty victims.

"These Spaniards are perfect demons when they are obstinate," said Pincheira.

"Yes," Nocobotha answered him, mad with fury, "if ever I place my foot on their chest they will expiate the wrongs they have done my race."

"I am entirely devoted to you," Pincheira continued:

"Thanks, my friend. When the day comes I will remind you of your promise."

"I shall be ready. But at present what are your designs?"

"The scar that madman has made on my head compels me to fire the train as soon as possible."

"Do so, I pray, and let us finish with these accursed Spaniards as soon as we can."

"Then you really hate your countrymen?"

"I have an Indian heart, and that is saying enough."

"I will soon procure you the opportunity to slake your vengeance."

"May heaven hear you!"

"But the chiefs have again assembled round the council-fire; come, brother."

CHAPTER V.

THE COUNCIL OF THE ULMENS.

THE Indians, while collecting their dead, sought in vain the corpse of the white man, and persuaded themselves that his comrades had carried it off.

What had really become of Pedrito ?

The bombero was one of those iron men whom death alone can conquer. He wished, therefore, to be present at the council of the chiefs, the importance of which he suspected ; and instead of throwing his life away in an unequal struggle, he found in Nocobotha's shot the pretext he was seeking. He pretended to be mortally wounded, and both friends and enemies were duped by his stratagem.

So soon as he had slipped down off his horse he was able, either by crawling like a lizard, or leaping like a cougar, to hide himself in the hollow trunk of the tree. There he was as safe as in the fortress of Carmen. However, like a bold hunter, who has always time to be killed, he had not thrown his weapons away. His first care was to wrap up his arm in a piece of cloth, in order to prevent the flow of blood from his wound ; then he arranged himself as well as he could, with his head thrust slightly forward, to listen.

All the chiefs were already assembled, and Lucaney, ulmen of the Puelches, was the first to speak.

"The Spaniard who dared to introduce himself among us, in order to violate the secret of our deliberations, is dead ; we are alone ; let us begin."

"It shall be done according to the desire of my brother, the ulmen of the Puelches," Nocobotha answered ; "where is the wise matchi ?"

"Here," said a tall, thin man, whose face was striped, and who was dressed like a woman.

"Let the wise matchi approach and accomplish the rites."

"A matchitun is necessary," the sorcerer said.

The usual preparations for this conjuration were immediately made. Two lances were planted, one on the right and one on the left of the sacred tree. On the left-hand one were hung a drum, and a vessel filled with fermented liquor ; twelve other vessels, containing similar liquor, were ranged in a circle from one lance to the other. A sheep and a colt were brought in, and deposited near the vessels, and two old squaws placed themselves by the side of the drum. The preparations terminated, the matchi turned to Nocobotha.

"Why does the ulmen of the Aucas ask for the matchitun ?" he asked,

Metipan stepped out of the circle.

"An hereditary hatred has for a long time separated the Aucas and the Pehuenches," he said; "the interest of all the great nations desires the end of this hatred. Kelzulepan, my ancestor, ulmen of the Pehuenches, carried off a white slave belonging to Medzeliputzi, toqui of the Aucas, and great grandfather of Nocobotha.

"Before the assembled chiefs, in the face of heaven, I have come to tell Nocobotha, the descendant of Yupanqui, the son of the sun, that my ancestor behaved badly to his, and I am ready, in order to extinguish all discord—past, present, and future—to give him here a white, young, lovely, and virgin slave."

"I give up, before Gualichu," Nocobotha answered, "the hatred which my nation and I had sworn against you and yours."

"Does Gualichu approve our conduct?" Metipan asked.

The matchi seemed to reflect profoundly.

"Yes," he replied, "you have gained the protection of Gualichu; let the white slave be brought up; perhaps he will demand that she should be surrendered to him."

"His will be done," both ulmen said.

Two warriors led up a girl of about seventeen, and placed her between the lances, with her face turned to the tree of Gualichu. On seeing her, Pedrito felt a cold perspiration break out all over him, and a mist covered his eyes.

"Whence comes this strange emotion?" the bombero muttered to himself.

The girl's large black eyes had an expression of gentle melancholy. She was dressed after the fashion of the Pehuenche women; the woollen *quedito* was rolled round her body, fastened on the shoulders by two silver pins, and on her limbs by a *kepike*, or silken girdle, six inches in width, and secured by a buckle. The two ends of a square *pilken*, like a cloak, were fastened on her chest by a *topu*, adorned with a magnificent head in gold. She had on her neck two collars of beads, and on each of her arms four bracelets of glass, pearls, and silver balls. Her long black hair was parted down the centre into two tresses, tied up with blue ribbons, which floated on her shoulders, and terminated in bells; on her head was a conical cap of blue and red beads.

At this graceful apparition the Indians, who are very fond of white women, could not, despite their natural stoicism, restrain a murmur of admiration.

At a signal from the matchi the ceremony began. The two old squaws beat the drum, while the spectators, guided by the sorcerer, struck up a symbolical song while dancing round the captive.

The drum ceased with the song; then the matchi lit a cigar, inhaled the smoke, and thrice perfumed the tree, the animals, and the maiden, whose bosom he at the same time laid bare. He put his mouth to it and began sucking till he drew blood, and the poor child made superhuman efforts not to shriek. The dancing, accompanied by song, began again, and the old women beat the drum with all the strength of their

arms. Pedrito, full of compassion for the innocent victim of Indian superstition, longed to fly to her help.

In the meanwhile the matchi, with his swollen cheeks, became more excited; his eyes grew bloodshot, he seemed possessed by the demon, and all at once became furious; he writhed and behaved like an epileptic. Then the dance ceased, and Metipan, with a stroke of his machete, cut open the flank of the colt, tore out its palpitating heart, and gave it to the sorcerer, who sucked the blood, and employed it to make a cross on the maiden's brow. The latter, suffering from great terror, began to tremble violently.

A storm, which had been gathering in the clouds, now broke out. A blue flash shot athwart the sky, the thunder rolled with a terrible din, and a blast of wind dashed over the plain, sweeping away the toldos, the fragments of which it dispersed far and wide.

The Indians were already terrified by the storm, but more so when a formidable voice, that appeared to issue from the tree of Gualichu, uttered the words—

“Retire! My wrath is let loose upon you. Leave this miserable white slave as an expiation of your crimes. Fly! and woe to those who look back!”

A livid flash and a violent peal of thunder served as peroration to this harangue.

“Let us fly!” cried the matchi, who in his terror was ready to believe in his god.

But, profiting by this unexpected intervention to enforce his own power, he continued—

“Fly, brothers! Gualichu has spoken to his servant. Woe to those who resist his orders!”

The Indians had no need of this recommendation from their sorcerer; a superstitious terror lent them wings. They rushed tumultuously towards the horses, and soon the desert echoed again with their wild flight. The tree of Gualichu was deserted, and the maiden alone lay fainting on the ground.

When all was quiet on the pampa, and the sound of the horses' gallop was lost in the distance, Pedrito thrust his head out of the tree, peered into the black depths of the night, and, reassured by the silence, ran up to the girl. Pale as a beauteous lily laid low by the storm, the poor girl had her eyes closed, and did not breathe. The bombero raised her in his muscular arms, and carried her close to the tree, laying her on a pile of skins belonging to a destroyed toldo. He placed her cautiously on this softer couch and her head hung insensibly on his chest.

It was a strange group, in the midst of this devastated plain, only illuminated by the lightning flashes—this young and lovely girl and this rude wood-ranger offering a touching picture.

Pain and sorrow were delineated on Pedrito's face. He, whose whole life had been but one long drama, who had no faith in his heart, who was ignorant of gentle feelings and sweet sympathies, he, the bombero, the slayer of Indians, was moved and felt something new stir within him. Two heavy tears ran down his bronzed cheeks.

"Can she be dead? O Heaven!"

This name, which he had hitherto only used in blasphemy, he uttered almost with respect. It was a sort of prayer and cry from his heart. This man believed.

"How to help her?" he asked himself.

The rain that fell in torrents eventually restored the maiden, who, half opening her eyes, murmured, in a faint voice—

"Where am I? What has happened?"

"She speaks! she lives! she is saved!" Pedrito exclaimed.

"Who is there?" she asked.

At the sight of the bombero's gloomy face she had a fresh outburst of terror, and fell back exhausted.

"Reassure yourself, my girl. I am your friend."

"My friend! what means that word? Have slaves any friends? Ah, yes," she continued, speaking as if in a dream, "I have suffered terribly. Still I can remember long, long ago, being happy, but alas! the worst misfortune is the recollection of past happiness."

She was silent. The bombero gazed at her, and listened to her with awe. That voice! those features!

"Oh, speak, speak again," he said; "what do you remember of your youthful years?"

"Why think of past joys in misfortune? what does it avail?" she added, shaking her head with discouragement. "My history is that of all unfortunate persons. There was a time when, like other children, the song of birds lulled me to sleep, when flowers smiled on me when I awoke, and a mother who loved and embraced me—all that has fled for ever."

Pedrito had raised two poles covered with skins to shelter her from the storm, which was gradually subsiding.

"You are kind, for you have saved me; still, your kindness was cruel, for why did you not let me die? People who are dead no longer suffer. The Pehuenches will return, and then——"

She did not conclude, but buried her face in her hands, with choking sobs.

"Fear nothing, senorita; I will defend you."

"Poor man! alone against all. But before my last hour arrives, listen to me, for I wish to relieve my heart. One day I was playing in my mother's arms, my father was near us, with my two sisters, but my four brothers, resolute men who would not have feared twenty, were away. Well, the Pehuenches came up, they burned our estancia, they killed my mother, and——"

"Mercedes! Mercedes!" the bombero exclaimed, "is it really you? do I find you again?"

"That was the name my mother gave me."

"It is I, Pedro, Pedrito, your brother," said the bombero, shouting with joy.

"Pedrito! my brother! Yes, yes, I remember."

She fell senseless into her brother's arms.

"Wretch that I am! I have killed her! Mercedes, my beloved sister, come to yourself again!"

The maiden opened her eyes once more, and threw herself on the bombero's neck, weeping with joy.

"Pedrito, my kind brother, do not leave me; defend me; they would kill me."

"Poor girl! they will pass over my body before reaching you."

"They will do so," a sarcastic voice exclaimed behind the tent.

Two men appeared, Nocobotha and Pincheira. Pedrito, holding his sister, who was half dead with terror, leant against one of the posts, drew his machete, and prepared for defence.

Nocobotha and Pincheira, too enlightened to be the dupes of the mysterious voice from the tree, and yield to the general panic, had, however, fled with their comrades; but they had turned back. Curious to know the meaning of this enigma, and the author of the mystification, they had listened to the entire conversation between the bombero and his sister.

"Well," Pincheira said, with a laugh, "you seem tolerably lively for a dead man. It seems that you must be killed twice in order to make sure that you will not recover. But, be easy, if my friend missed you, I shall not."

"What do you want with me?" Pedrito said. "Let us pass."

"Not at all," Pincheira replied: "that would be rather too dangerous an example. And stay," he added, after listening, "do you hear that galloping? your affair is as good as settled; there are our warriors coming back."

In fact, the sound of horsemen drew nearer, and in the pale gleam of dawn the dim outlines of numerous horsemen could be distinguished in the distance. Pedrito saw that he was lost; he kissed for the last time the pale brow of his unconscious sister, laid her behind him, crossed himself, and prepared to die like a brave man.

"Come," said Nocobotha, "let us have an end of this; it looks as if this scoundrel were afraid."

"Make haste," Pincheira answered, "I hear our men, and if we do not make haste our prey will be torn from us."

"You did not fancy you were speaking so truly, Senor Pincheira," Pepe exclaimed, suddenly appearing with his two brothers; "now let us see who is to be killed."

"Thanks, my brave brothers," said Pedrito.

"Malediction!" Pincheira said, with an oath, "are these scoundrels everywhere?"

"I will not have him escape me," Nocobotha muttered, as he bit his lips till the blood came.

"Fie on you," Pepe exclaimed, ironically. "Defend yourselves like men, or I shall kill you like dogs."

The blades crossed, and the fight commenced.

CHAPTER VI.

NOCOBOTHA.

MERCEDES, who had recovered from her fainting fit, felt so terrified that she regretted that she had awoke again.

After the first collision Nocobotha fell back a step, lowered his weapon, made Pincheira a sign to imitate him, and with folded arms walked towards the brothers.

"Stay," he cried, "this fight will not take place; it is not proper for men to risk their lives in disputing for the possession of a woman."

An ironical smile contracted the bronzed faces of Pedrito's brothers, while Pincheira stamped his foot. The Indian chief continued, without heeding these marks of disapproval—

"A man's blood is precious. Take away your sister, my good fellow. I give her to you."

"Our sister!" the three young men exclaimed, with amazement.

"Yes," Pedrito said; "but what conditions do you exact?"

"None," the chief answered, nobly.

Nocobotha's generosity was the more disinterested because the *bomberos* perceived by the first rays of the rising sun a band of nearly one thousand Indians, well equipped, and painted and armed for war, who had silently advanced and formed a circle round them.

"Can we," Pedrito asked, "trust to your word, and have no cause to fear a trap?"

"My word," the chief answered, haughtily, "is more sacred than that of a white man. We have, like you, noble feelings, more so, perhaps, than others," he added, pointing to a red line that traversed his face; "we know how to forgive."

Nocobotha read the thoughts of the *bomberos* on their faces. They felt themselves conquered by the magnanimity of the chief, who smiled triumphantly on divining their astonishment and confusion.

"My friend," he said to Pincheira, "let fresh horses be given to these men."

Pincheira hesitated.

"At once," he said, with a gesture full of supreme grace.

The other, who was a semi-savage, yielding to Nocobotha's superiority, obeyed, and five horses of great value, and ready saddled and bridled, were led up.

"Chief," Pedrito said, in a slightly shaking voice, "I am not grateful for my life, as I do not fear death; but, in my brothers' names and my own, I thank you for our sister. We never forget an insult or a kind-

ness. Farewell ! perhaps I shall some day have the opportunity to prove to you that we are not ungrateful."

The chief bowed without answering. The bomberos grouped round Mercedes, returned his salute, and went off slowly.

"Well, it was your wish," Pincheira said, shrugging his shoulders in vexation.

"Patience!" Nocobotha answered, in a deep voice.

During this time an immense fire had been kindled at the foot of the tree of Gualichu, where the Indians, whose superstitious fears had been dissipated with the darkness, had again assembled in council.

Nocobotha took up his speech at the point where it had been interrupted by the unexpected interference of the bombero.

"I thank my brother," he said, "for the gift of the white slave. From this day his nation and mine will form one family, whose herds will peacefully graze on the same pasturage, and whose warriors will sleep side by side on the war-track."

The matchi then lit a pipe, and handed it to the two chiefs, who smoked in turn, passing the pipe to each other till the tobacco was entirely consumed. Then the pipe was thrown on the fire.

"Gualichu," he said, solemnly, "has heard your words. Swear that your alliance will not be broken until you can again smoke that pipe."

"We swear it."

The two ulmens laid each his left hand on the other's right shoulder, stretched out the right hand to the sacred tree, and kissed each other on the lips, saying—

"Brother, receive this kiss. May my lips wither and my tongue be torn out if I betray my oath."

When the chiefs had returned to their places at the council-fire, Lucaney bowed to Nocobotha.

"What communications did my brother wish to make to the ulmens?"

"Ulmens of the Puelches, Araucanos, Pehuenches, Huileches, and Patagonians," said Nocobotha, "for many moons past my mind has been sad. I see with grief our hunting-grounds invaded by the white men. We whose countless tribes only a few centuries ago covered the land contained between the two seas are now reduced to a small band of warriors, who fly before our despoilers. Our sacred cities, the last refuges of the civilisation of our fathers, are about to become the prey of these human-faced monsters, who have no other god but gold.

"Tracked like wild animals, brutalised by fire-water, and decimated by the sword, our wandering hordes are but the shadow of a people. Our conquerors despise our religion, they outrage our wives, kill our children, and burn our villages. Has the blood of your fathers become impoverished in your veins? Answer, will you die slaves or live as free men?"

At these words, uttered in a masculine and penetrating voice, and whose effect was heightened by the most majestic gestures, a quiver ran along the assembly.

"Speak, speak again!" they shouted.

The great ulmen smiled proudly, and continued—

"The hour has at length arrived, after so much humiliation, to shake off the disgraceful yoke. Within a few days, if you are willing, we will drive the whites far from our borders. I have long been watching the Spaniards, and I know their tactics and resources; and in order to annihilate them we only need skill and courage."

The Indians interrupted him with shouts of joy.

"You shall be free," Nocobotha continued. "I will restore to you the rich valleys of your ancestors. This project has, ever since I have become a man, been fermenting in my head. Far from you and me be the thought that I have any intention to force myself on you as leader of the army! No; you must choose your leader freely, and after having elected him, obey him blindly. Do not deceive yourselves; our enemy is strong, his forces are numerous and well-disciplined. Appoint a supreme chief—select the most worthy, and I will joyfully march under his orders. I have spoken."

And, after bowing to the assembly, Nocobotha mingled with the crowd of chiefs, with a serene brow, but with his heart devoured by anxiety.

His eloquence seduced the Indians, carried them away, and cast them into a species of frenzy. They almost regarded Nocobotha as a genius of a superior essence to their own, and bowed the knee to worship him, so straight had he gone to their hearts. For a long time the council was affected by a species of delirium. When, however, tranquillity was restored, the wisest among the *ulmens* discussed the opportunity of taking up arms, and in the end the opinion was in favour of a general insurrection. The ranks, momentarily broken, were restored, and Lucaney spoke as follows—

"This seventeenth day of the moon of Kekil-kiven it has been resolved by all the chiefs, each representing a nation or a tribe, assembled round the council-fire in front of the sacred tree of Gualichu, and after the performance of the sacred rites to render the spirits favourable to us, that war is declared against the Spaniards. As the war is holy, and has liberty for its object, all will be expected to take part in it—men, women, and children; all to the extent of their strength."

A long cry of enthusiasm cheered Lucaney, but he continued after a while—

"The chiefs, after careful consideration, have chosen as supreme *toqui* of all the nations, with uncontrolled and unlimited power, the wisest, the most prudent, to command us. This warrior is the chief of the Aucas, whose race is so ancient, Nocobotha, the son of the sun."

A thunder of applause greeted these last words. Nocobotha walked into the centre of the circle, bowed to the *ulmens*, and said, in a proud accent, "I accept. *Ulmens*, my brothers, in a year you shall be free, or I shall be dead."

"Long live the great *toqui*!" the crowd shouted.

"War to the whites!" Nocobotha continued; "a war without mercy. Remember the law of the pampas: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' Each chief will send the *quipus* to his nation, for at the end of this moon we will rouse our enemies by a thunder-clap. Go, and lose no time."

The ulmens bowed without replying, rejoined the escort, and soon disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Nocobotha and Pincheira remained alone, a detachment guarding them a little distance away.

"Well," said Pincheira, "we have succeeded."

"Yes," he answered; "war is declared, and I am the supreme chief; but I hesitate. Do those primitive men thoroughly understand? Are they ripe for liberty?"

"You startle me, friend. What, then, are your plans?"

"It is true, you know nothing, but you are worthy of such an enterprise. I wish——"

At this moment an Indian, whose horse, reeking with perspiration, seemed to breathe fire through its nostrils, came up to the two ulmens, before whom he stopped, and, as if converted into a granite statue, bent down to Nocobotha's ear.

"Already!" the latter exclaimed. "Oh, there is not a moment to lose. Quick, my horse."

"What is the matter?" Pincheira asked him.

"Nothing that can interest you. To-night, at the pass of the Guanaco you shall know all."

Nocobotha's horse snorted and dashed off like an arrow from a bow.

Ten minutes later all had disappeared, and solitude and silence reigned round the tree.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COUGARS.

"THANKS, Blas, my friend," Don Valentine said, after a conversation which was prolonged far into the night; "that Don Torribio Carvajal never pleased either my daughter or myself."

"What do you intend doing?" the other asked.

"I am greatly embarrassed: how can I close my doors against him what pretext should I have?"

"Well!" Blas said, "perhaps we are alarming ourselves too soon. This gentleman is doubtless no more or less than a lover. You do not like him as son-in-law; but love, they say, is a strange thing, and some day or other——"

"I have designs for my daughter."

"As you will. By the way, may not this mysterious caballero be a secret agent of General Oribe?"

"That is the truth, I believe. His hints to the gauchos, his unexpected absences, whose purpose is unknown, are simply of a political nature; and Don Torribio is a conspirator."

"Nothing else. But be on your guard."

"In the expectation of General Oribe making an attack, let us make ourselves secure. The estancia is close to Fort San Jose and the sea; we will await the issue of these machinations there in great security, because a vessel, anchored opposite the estancia, will be at my disposal, and on the slightest alarm convey us away."

"True; and in the country you will not be annoyed by Don Torribio's visits."

"Caramba! you are right; and I will proceed to give orders for departure. Do not go away, for I want your assistance."

Don Valentine now aroused the servants and peons; and the valuables were at once packed up.

At the first gleam of dawn Dona Concha was greatly surprised, when her lady's-maid, a young mulatto girl, informed her of her father's sudden resolution.

At about eight in the morning Blas Sallazar, whom his foster-brother had sent with a letter to the captain of the schooner moored off Carmen, returned to the house, and stated that the captain would sail at once.

The courtyard of the house resembled a hostelry. Fifteen mules, loaded with bales, stamped in their impatience to be off, while the travelling-litter was being prepared for Dona Concha. Forty saddle-horses were fastened to iron rings; four or five mules were prepared to carry the young lady's female attendants, while two negros held two splendid chargers, which stamped and champed their silver bits while awaiting their riders. There was a deafening confusion of shouts, laughter, and kicking. In the street, a crowd, among whom were Corrocho and Panchito, curiously watched their departure.

At last, at about half-past eight o'clock, the arrieros placed themselves at the head of their mules; the servants, armed to the teeth, mounted, and Dona Concha, dressed in a charming travelling-costume, walked down the steps, and, with a merry laugh, bounded into her litter.

At a sign from the capataz the mules started. Don Valentine then turned to an old negro, who was standing respectfully near him, hat in hand.

"Good-bye, *tio* Peralta," he said to him; "I give you charge of the house."

"Your excellency can reckon on my vigilance," the old man answered; "may God bless your excellency, and the *nina* too!"

"Thank you, *tio* Peralta," the young lady said.

The night storm had completely swept the sky, which was of a pale blue; the sun, already high on the horizon, spread profusely its warm beams, which were filtered through the fragrant vapours that rose from the ground. The atmosphere was wondrously transparent, a slight breeze refreshed the air, and swarms of birds, glistening with a thousand hues, dashed about. The mules, which followed the bell of the *yegua madrina*, trotted to the songs of the arrieros. The caravan marched

gaily across the sandy desert, raising the dust around it, and undulating like a long serpent, in the endless windings of the road.

The white houses of Carmen had disappeared long ago when the capataz, leaving the head of the party, galloped up to the head of the litter.

"What is the matter?" Don Valentine asked.

"Nothing much," Blas replied; "still, excellency, look," he added.

"It is a fire."

"Turn your eyes to the east-south-east."

"That is another fire. Who the deuce has lighted fires on those scarped points, and for what object?"

"As a fire does not light itself, as we have some 120° of heat, and as——"

"You conclude——"

"I conclude that these fires are signals."

"Stay, stay: that is logical, my friend, and you may be right, perhaps; but what do we care?"

"Those signals tell that Don Valentine Cardoso and his daughter have left Carmen."

"But I do not care about Don Torribio knowing of my departure."

A sudden cry was heard, and the mules stopped.

"What is going on down there?" Blas asked.

"A cougar, a cougar!" the arrieros shouted.

"Canario, it is true," the capataz said.

About two hundred yards ahead of the caravan two cougars were drawn up ready for a spring, with their eyes fixed on the mules. They were about the size of a calf; the head bore a great likeness to that of a cat, and their skins, smooth and soft, were of a silvery tawny hue, spotted with black.

"Come on," Don Valentine exclaimed, "uncouple the dogs, and let us have a hunt."

"A hunt!" the capataz repeated.

A dozen mastiffs were unloosed, which, on approaching the animals, barked simultaneously. The mules were collected and formed into a large circle, in the centre of which the litter was placed. Ten servants were told off to guard the Dona, and Don Valentine remained by her side.

Horses, riders, and dogs rushed in rivalry on the ferocious animals with yells, shouts, and barking. The noble beasts lashed their flanks with their powerful tails, and then fled. Some of the hunters rode off to cut off their retreat, while others bending, over the saddle and guiding their horses with their knees, brandished their terrible bolas, and pursued them with all their strength, though without checking the cougars, which turned furiously on the dogs, and hurled them a dozen yards off, yelling with pain. The mastiffs, however, long accustomed to this style of hunting, watched for a favourable opportunity, threw themselves on the lions' backs, and dug their teeth into their flesh; but the cougars, with one blow of their murderous paw, swept them off like flies, and resumed their hurried course.

At last one of them, hobbled by the bolas, and surrounded by dogs, rolled on the ground, digging up the sand with its quivering claws, and uttering a fearful yell. Don Valentine finished it by putting a bullet in its eye.

The second remained still unwounded, and by its furious leaps foiled the attack and skill of the hunters. The dogs, worn out, did not dare approach it. Its flight had brought it within a few paces of the caravan. All at once it turned to the right, bounded over the mules, and crouched right in front of the litter. Dona Concha, pale as death, with closed eyes, instinctively clasped her hands, and fainted.

At this moment two shots struck it right in the chest. It turned round on its new adversary—no other than the worthy capataz, who, his eye fixed on the lion, awaited the monster. The cougar hesitated, took a parting glance at its prey still lying in the litter, and rushed with a roar on Blas, who pulled the trigger again. The animal writhed on the ground, and the capataz ran up to it, machete in hand. The man and the lion rolled together, but only one of them rose—it was the man.

Dona Concha was saved. Her father pressed her joyously to his breast; she opened her eyes at last, and held out her hand to Don Blas.

"I can no longer count the number of times you have saved the lives of my father and myself."

"Oh, senorita!" the worthy man said, as he kissed the tips of her fingers.

"You are my foster-brother, and I can only discharge my debt to you by eternal gratitude," Don Valentine said. "Strip the lions of their skins, my men," he said, turning to the servants.

No one equals the Hispano-Americans in the art of flaying animals; in a minute the two lions, above which the urubus and vultures of the Andes were already hovering, were stripped of their skins.

Order was restored in the caravan, which started again, and within an hour reached the Estancia of San Julian.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ESTANCIA OF SAN JULIAN.

THE bomberos, accompanied by Mercedes, buried themselves in the desert. Their journey lasted four hours, and brought them to the banks of the Rio Negro, to one of the charming oases created by the river-mud,

and covered by clumps of willows, nopals, palms, chirimoyas, lemon-trees, and flowering jessamines.

Pedrito seized Mercedes in his robust arms, lifted her from the front of his saddle, and laid her gently on the turf. The horses began quietly nibbling the young tree-shoots.

"Tell us how you found our sister," Juan said.

The elder brother, as if he had not heard, made no reply, and with his eyes fixed on the girl, listened to a voice that spoke within him; he fancied he saw again the living portrait of his mother, and said to himself, "The same look, the same smile. Poor mother, poor sister! Mercedes," he added, in a louder voice, "do you remember your grown-up brothers, who loved you so dearly?"

"Come, come," Pepe exclaimed, stamping his foot, "that is not fair, brother; you keep our bills in the water like a lot of ducks, and monopolise the girl's kind looks. If she is really our regretted Mercedes, speak. We have as much right to embrace her as you have."

"You are right," Pedrito answered; "forgive me, brothers. It is our dear little sister—embrace her."

The bomberos did not wait for the invitation to be repeated, and without asking the slightest explanation from Pedrito, disputed with each other as to who should devour her with caresses. The maiden, who was deeply affected, and whom the Indians had not accustomed to such happiness, yielded to the intoxication of joy. While they were indulging in these transports, Pedrito had lit a fire and prepared a substantial meal, composed of fruit and a leg of guanaco. They sat down and ate with good appetites. Pedrito recounted his adventures at the tree of Gualichu. His story occupied a long time, for it was at times interrupted by the young men, who laughed most heartily at the tragic-comical incidents.

"Do you know," Lopez said to him, "that you have been a god?"

"A god who ran a greater risk of becoming immortal than he cared for," Pedrito replied; "for I feel that I love life since I have found the child again. Well, here she is, and he will be a clever fellow who takes her from us. Still, we cannot let her share our precarious existence."

"That is true," the other brothers said.

"What is to be done?" Pepe muttered, sadly.

"Our poor sister would die," said Pedrito; "we cannot make a female bombero of her."

"I could do anything for you, my kind brothers."

"Our life is at the mercy of an Indian bullet. The fear that you may fall again into the hands of the Aucas or the Puelches troubles me; and if you remained with us and shared our dangers, I should turn a coward."

"During the ten years we have been prowling about the pampas," Pepe remarked, "we have broken with all our old acquaintance."

"I have an idea," observed Lopez.

"Out with it."

"You remember the capataz of the Estancia de San Julian. What is his name?"

"Don Blas Sallazar."

"The very man," Lopez continued; "I fancy we have saved his life and his master's ere now, and that both owe us a candle as thick as my arm in gratitude."

"Don Valentine and his capataz," Juan said, "would have lost their skins to that demon of a Pincheira had it not been for our rifles."

"That is our affair. Lopez is right."

"Don Valentine passes for a good-hearted man."

"He has, I think, a daughter whom he tenderly loves, and will understand the difficulty."

"But we cannot go to Carmen," said Pepe.

"Let us ride to the estancia, then; it will only take us a couple of hours."

"We will be off," said Pedrito; "Juan and Lopez will remain here, while Pepe and I escort the chica. Kiss your brothers, Mercedes. Now then, Pepe; you two keep good watch."

Mercedes waved a parting farewell to her brothers, and, escorted by Pepe and Pedro, started at a gallop for San Julian.

At about three o'clock they perceived, fifty yards from them, the estancia which Don Valentine and his daughter had reached hardly two hours before.

The Estancia of San Julian, undoubtedly the richest and strongest position on the coast, stood on a peninsula six miles in circumference, covered with wood and pastures, on which upwards of two thousand head of cattle grazed at liberty. Partially surrounded by the sea, which formed a natural fortification, the strip of land, twenty feet in width at the most, was guarded by a battery of five guns. The house, which was surrounded by lofty parapetted and bastioned walls, was a fortress, capable of sustaining a regular siege, thanks to eight guns, which defended the approaches. It was composed of a large main building, with a terraced roof, having ten windows on the frontage, and with two wings. A large flight of steps, protected by a balustrade, protected by a verandah, gave access to the rooms, which were furnished with the simple and picturesque luxury peculiar to the Spanish farms of America.

Between the house and the wall, in which there was, opposite the steps, a cedar gate five inches thick, and lined with strong iron plates, extended a large English garden, well wooded, and beautifully laid out. The space left free behind the farm was occupied by the corrals in which the cattle were shut up at night.

The house was gay and pleasant, and could be seen for some distance off, half hidden by foliage. From the first floor windows there was a view on one side of the sea, on the other of the Rio Negro, which ran through the plain like a silver thread, and was lost in the azure distance of the horizon.

Ever since the last war with the Indians a *mirador* had been built on the roof of the main building, where a sentry stood day and night to watch and announce upon a buffalo-horn the approach of strangers. In addition, the isthmus battery was guarded by six men. When the bombros, therefore, were still some distance from the estancia, their coming

had been signalled, and Don Blas Sallazar, accompanied by Patito, was standing behind the battery to challenge them.

The bomberos were aware of the orders, and on coming within twenty paces of the battery stopped and waited.

"Who goes there?" a voice shouted.

"Friends," Pedrito answered.

"Who are you?"

"Bomberos."

"Good; what do you want?"

"To speak to the senor capataz, Don Blas Sallazar."

"Why," Blas himself exclaimed, "it is Pedrito."

"Yes, yes, Don Blas," Pedrito said; "and this is my brother Pepe, at your service."

"As he has been before, Don Blas, by your leave," Pepe said, insinuatingly.

"That is true; lower the drawbridge."

The bomberos entered, and the bridge was immediately pulled up after them.

"Carai! what a pleasant surprise, my friends!" the capataz said; "we see you most remarkably seldom. Come to my house, and you can then tell me what brings you here. It must be a serious matter, if I know you."

"Very serious indeed," Pedrito answered.

The capataz mounted his horse and drew up alongside Pedrito.

"May I ask, caballero, without indiscretion, who that girl dressed in the Indian fashion is? She is white, is she not?"

"She is our sister, capataz."

"I was not aware you had a sister, so forgive me, for I am not a sorcerer."

The horsemen had arrived at their destination. The capataz dismounted, the bomberos followed his example, and followed him into a spacious ground-floor room, where an elderly, healthy-looking woman was busy peeling Indian corn. It was Don Blas's mother, and Don Valentine's nurse. She greeted the new-comers with a good-humoured smile, offered them seats, and went to fetch a jug of chica, which she placed before them.

"To your health, senores," said the capataz, after filling the cups to the brim. "The sun is confoundedly hot, and you will find this refreshing."

"Thanks," said Pedrito, who at once emptied his glass.

"Come, what have you to tell me? Speak freely, unless," Blas added, "my mother is in your way."

"No," Pedro said, eagerly; "no, let the senora remain, for what we have to say everybody may hear, and especially your mother we have come to speak of our sister."

"I do not wish to offend you, Don Pedro," the capataz interrupted him, "but you did wrong in keeping the young lady with you, for she cannot share all the perils of your life; can she, mother?"

The old lady gave a nod of assent.

"You can do what you please, of course," Don Blas continued; "everybody is at liberty to arrange his life as he pleases, provided that it be honestly."

"Your remark, Don Blas," Pedrito said, "overwhelms us with joy."

And without further delay he told Mercedes' story. Towards its close the Dona left the room.

"You are a worthy man, Don Pedro," Don Blas exclaimed. "Yes, deuce take me if you are not. You have judged me rightly, and I thank you for thinking of me."

"Then you consent?" Pepe asked.

"One moment," the capataz said, as he filled the glasses again. "Here's to your health, and that of the senorita. I am only a poor fellow, and a bachelor, hence my protection would compromise a young lady's reputation. Senores, a girl's reputation is like an egg; once cracked, it cannot be mended. You understand?"

"What is to be done?" Pedro muttered.

"Patience, compadre! I am nothing myself, but Don Valentine Cardoso, my master, is kind; he is fond of me, and has a charming daughter; I will plead your sister's cause to him."

"The cause is already gained, my friend," said Don Valentine, who entered with Dona Concha.

Pepe and Pedrito knew not how to express their gratitude to Senor Cardoso.

"My friends," the latter said, "I am only too happy to discharge my debt to you. We have an old account outstanding between us. If my daughter still has a father, she owes it to you."

"Oh, senor!" the two young men protested.

"My daughter, Conchita, will have a sister, and I two daughters instead of one. Do you wish it so, Conchita?"

"I thank you, father," as she repeatedly kissed Mercedes. "My dear girl," she added, "kiss your brothers, and follow me to my apartments; I will give you such articles of clothing as you require, and enable you to get rid of this heathen costume."

Mercedes threw herself into her brothers' arms with tears.

"Come, come, little maid," Dona Concha said, "do not cry; you will see them again; wipe your eyes, for I mean you to be happy. Come, smile at once, my darling, and follow me."

The sentinel's horn at this moment announced that a stranger was asking admission to the estancia.

"Thanks, once again, Don Valentine," Pedrito said; "we go away with minds at rest."

"Good-bye, till we meet again, my friends."

Pedrito and Pepe, light both in body and mind, left the estancia, and passed a horseman who came up the steps at a sharp trot.

"Where have I seen that man?" said Pedrito. "I feel certain I have met him before."

"Do you know Don Torribio Carvajal?" the capataz asked.

"I am not aware, if that is the caballero's name, who he is, or where I

have seen him ; still, I am certain that we met a very little while ago."

"Good-bye, Don Blas, and thank you," the bomberos said, as they shook his hand.

CHAPTER IX.

DON SYLVIO D'ARENAL.

AN hour before the bomberos' arrival at the estancia a visitor had presented himself who was eagerly greeted by Don Valentine. This visitor, about eight-and-twenty years of age, and elegantly built, possessed the manners of a man of distinction, and a handsome face. His name was Don Sylvio d'Arenal, and he belonged to one of the richest and most respected families in Buenos Ayres. His income was about one hundred thousand a-year.

The family of Don Sylvio and Don Valentine had ever lived on a footing of the greatest intimacy. The young man and the young lady were educated together, and hence, when her handsome cousin came to say good-bye to her, and told her of his departure for Europe, where he was to travel for some years and assume elegant manners, Dona Concha, who was at that time twelve years of age, felt a great vexation. Since their childhood, unconsciously, they loved.

Sylvio went away, bearing his love with him.

Only a few days previously the young man had returned, and, freighting a schooner, had set sail for Carmen, burning with desire to see again the woman he loved, and whom he had not seen for three years.

At Carmen he found Don Valentine's house empty, and from the information he received from the old negro rode at a gallop to the estancia of San Julian. The surprise and joy of Don Valentine and his daughter were extreme. Conchita was especially happy, for she thought daily of Sylvio, and saw him through her recollections, but at the same time she felt in her heart an emotion of mingled pleasure and sorrow.

"Come, come, children," the father said, with a smile, "kiss each other ; I permit it."

Dona Concha offered Don Sylvia her blushing forehead, which he respectfully touched with his lips.

"Children," the worthy man continued, "the Rubicon is passed; indulge your joy at meeting after so lengthened a separation. It is the last, for you have met again for ever."

"Oh, for ever !" the young people repeated.

"Let us kill the fatted calf. Don Sylvio, you will remain here until you are married. Does that suit you?"

"Yes," said Sylvio, looking at Conchita, "on condition that it is soon, father."

"That's the way with lovers; they are always eager and impatient. Every one in his turn; I was once as happy."

One of those sweet and intimate conversations then began, in which the recollections of the past and the certainty of speedy happiness were blended. They were interrupted by Dona Sallazar entering the room. Don Sylvio proceeded to his apartment, while Concha and her father followed the old lady to the bomberos.

Don Valentine, surprised and irritated by the unexpected arrival of Don Torribio Carvajal, resolved to get rid of him.

"You did not expect me so soon?" Don Torribio said.

"I did not expect you at all; the less so because you spoke only yesterday, if I have a good memory, of a journey."

"That is true," he said, with a smile; "but who knows to-day what will take place to-morrow? You did not dream yesterday of leaving El Carmen."

"Well, as you know, we estancieros are often compelled to go to our estates suddenly."

"The same thing happens to me. I am, like you, compelled to live as a country gentleman for some time."

"Then you are living at your estancia?"

"Yes, we are neighbours, and you will be condemned to my presence, unless——"

"You will always be welcome."

"You are very polite," said Don Torribio.

"I am afraid, though, that I shall not long enjoy the pleasure of being your neighbour."

"Why so?"

"It is possible that I may return to Carmen within a week."

"Then you have only paid a passing visit here?"

"Not exactly. I had intended to remain here some months, but, as you said just now, who knows what the morrow will bring forth?"

The two speakers were feeling each other's strength by quickly-parried feints.

"May I be allowed to pay my respects to Madame Concha?" Don Torribio asked.

"She will soon be here. By the way, we have just taken charge of a girl of rare beauty, who has been two years a slave of the Indians, and whom her brothers brought to me scarce an hour ago, after having miraculously saved her from the hands of the pagans."

"Ah!" Torribio said, in a choking voice.

"Yes," Don Valentine continued, "her name is Mercedes, I believe: she appears very gentle. My daughter is wild about her already, and at this moment she is taking off her Indian clothes, and clothing her in a decent fashion."

"Very good; but are you sure that this woman is what she seems to

be? The Indians are villains, as you are aware, and this Mercedes is perhaps an Indian spy."

"You are mistaken, Don Torribio. I can trust the men who brought her to me."

"Watch her; take my advice."

"But she is a Spaniard."

"That proves nothing. Look at Pincheira; is he not an ex-officer of the army? He is now a chief of one of the principal Indian nations, and the most cruel adversary of the Spaniards."

"Pincheira, that is different!"

"As you please," said Don Torribio.

As Don Torribio uttered these words Dona Concha appeared, accompanied by Don Sylvio.

"Don Torribio," said the estanciero, "I have the honour to present to you Don Sylvio d'Arenal."

"I believe," said Don Torribio, "that I have already had the honour of meeting this gentleman in Paris."

"Your memory is faithful, sir," Don Sylvio replied; "we met at the house of the Marchioness de Lucenay."

"I was not aware of your return to America."

"I only reached home a few days ago; this morning I was at Carmen, and now I am here."

"Already here!" Don Torribio cried.

"Oh," Concha's father said, "this rather hasty visit was so natural that my daughter and I heartily pardoned Don Sylvio."

"Ah!" Don Torribio muttered, to say something, for he understood that he had a rival before him.

Dona Concha anxiously followed the conversation, playing with a fan that trembled in her hand.

"I hope, sir," Don Torribio said, courteously, "that we shall renew here the imperfect friendship commenced in Madame de Lucenay's salons."

"Unluckily," Don Valentine interrupted, in order to prevent Don Sylvio answering, "Senor d'Arenal will be unable to accept your kind invitation, for immediately after his marriage he intends to travel with his wife."

"His marriage!" Don Torribio said.

"Were you ignorant of it?"

"Yes."

"What a careless fellow I am! but we have no secrets from you. Don Sylvio d'Arenal is about to marry my daughter; the match has been arranged for a very long time."

Don Torribio turned pale; a mist passed before his eyes; he felt a deadly agony in his heart, and thought he was going to die. Dona Concha curiously followed his secret thoughts upon his face; but, feeling that all eyes were fixed upon him, the young man made a superhuman effort.

"May you be as happy, senorita, as I wish you," he said.

"I thank you, sir," Dona Concha answered.

"As for you, Senor d'Arenal, your happiness will make any man jealous; for you are taking away our most precious pearl."

"I will strive, senor, to be worthy of her; for I love her so dearly."

"They love one another so dearly," the father said, with cruel simplicity.

The young lovers exchanged a glance full of hope and happiness. Neither Don Valentine's last remark, nor the look of the betrothed couple was left unnoticed by Don Torribio, who concealed his grief beneath a smile.

"By Jove, neighbour," the father continued, "you will be present at the festival of betrothal?"

"Impossible, senor; important business calls me to my estancia, and, to my great regret, I must leave you."

"Still, if my daughter joined with me——"

"If I," Don Sylvio said, "dared——"

"On my honour, I must be gone. The sacrifice I make at this moment is the more painful to me," he added, with a sardonic smile, "because happiness generally flies so fast that it is impossible to catch it up."

"I fear no misfortune now," said Dona Concha, looking at Don Sylvio.

Carvajal replied with a shake of the head.

"I trust you are saying the truth, senorita but there is a French proverb——"

"What is it?"

"'Twixt cup and lip there's many a slip.'"

"Oh! the ugly proverb," Conchita exclaimed.

Don Torribio, without adding a word, bowed and left the room.

"Well, my friend," the estanciero said, "what do you think of that man?"

"His words are bitter; I know not why, but I feel sure he hates me."

"I hate him, too," said Concha, with a shudder.

"Perhaps he loved you, Conchita: for is it possible to see and not love you?"

"Who assures you that he is not meditating a crime?"

"This time, senorita, you are going too far; he is a gentleman."

"*Quien sabe?*" she replied.

CHAPTER X.

THE VIRGIN FOREST.

ON leaving the estancia of San Julian, Don Torribio Carvajal was a prey to one of those cold, concentrated passions, which slowly collect in the mind and at length burst forth with terrible force. His spurs lacerated the sides of his horse, and it doubled its furious speed.

Where was Don Torribio Carvajal going in this way? He did not know himself. He saw nothing, heard nothing. This state of over-excitement lasted some hours, during which his horse devoured space. At length the noble steed, utterly exhausted, dropped on its trembling knees, and fell on the sand.

Don Torribio rose and looked wildly around him.

Night had set in, thick darkness covered the landscape, and a mournful silence prevailed in the desert where chance had carried him.

"Where am I?" he said, as he tried to discover his whereabouts.

Don Torribio's eyes sought in vain to pierce the obscurity. He went up to his horse, which was lying on the ground and panting heavily; moved with pity for the companion of his adventurous journeys, he bent over it, placed in his waist-belt the pistols that were in the holsters, and, unfastening a gourd of rum, began washing the eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth of the poor beast, whose sides quivered. Half an hour passed in this way; the horse, somewhat refreshed, had got on its legs, and, with the instinct that distinguishes the race, had discovered a spring close by, where it quenched its thirst.

"All is not lost yet," Don Torribio muttered, "and perhaps I shall soon succeed in getting out of this place, for my friends are waiting for me, and I must join them."

But a deep roar broke forth a short distance away, repeated almost immediately from four different quarters. The horse's hair stood on end with terror. Even Don Torribio trembled.

"Malediction!" he exclaimed; "I am at a watering-place of the cougars."

At this moment he saw, about ten paces from him, two eyes that shone like live coals, and looked at him with strange fixedness.

Don Torribio was a man of tried courage, audacious, and even rash on occasions; but alone in the gloomy solitude in the midst of the black night, surrounded by ferocious beasts, he felt fear assail him against his will; he breathed with difficulty; his teeth were clenched, an icy perspiration poured down his whole person, and he was on the point of abandoning himself to his fate. This sudden discouragement disappeared before

a powerful will, and Don Torribio, sustained by the instinct of self-preservation, and that hope which springs eternal in the human breast, prepared for an unequal struggle.

The horse burst into a snort of terror and ran off.

"All the better," its rider thought; "perhaps it will escape."

A frightful concert of howls and roars broke out on all sides at the sound of the horse's flight, and huge shadows bounded along past Don Torribio. A violent blast swept the sky, and the moon lit up the desert with its mournful, sickly rays.

Not far off the Rio Negro ran between two scarped banks, and Don Torribio saw all around him the compact masses of a virgin forest, an inextricable chaos of rocks piled up pell-mell, and of fissures out of which clumps of trees grew. Here and there creepers were intertwined, describing the wildest curves, and only stopped their ramifications at the river. The soil, composed of sand and that detritus which abounds in American forests, gave way beneath the foot.

Don Torribio now discovered where he was. He was more than fifteen leagues from any habitation, on the outskirts of an immense forest, the only one in Patagonia which no ranger had as yet been bold enough to explore, such horror and mystery did its gloomy depths appear to reveal. Near the forest a limpid stream burst through the rocks, whose banks were trampled by numerous traces of the claws of wild beasts. This stream served them, in fact, as a watering-place when they left their dens after sunset, and went in search of food and drink. As a living testimony of this supposition two magnificent cougars, male and female, were standing on the bank, and watching with anxious eyes the sporting of their cubs.

"Hum," said Don Torribio, "these are dangerous neighbours."

And he mechanically turned his eyes away. A panther, stretched out on a rock in the position of a watchful cat, fixed its inflamed eyes upon him. Torribio, who was well armed according to the American fashion, had a rifle of wondrous accuracy, which he had leant against a rock close to him.

"Good," he said, "it will be a tough fight at any rate."

He raised his gun, but at the moment when he was about to fire, a plaintive mewling made him raise his head. A dozen wild cats of great size, perched on branches of trees, were looking down at him, while several wolves were crouching in front of him.

A number of vultures, urubus, and caracacas, with half-closed eyes, were seated on the surrounding rocks, apparently awaiting the hour for their meal.

Don Torribio jumped up on a rock, and then by the help of his hands and knees, gained, after extraordinary difficulties, a sort of natural terrace, situated about twenty feet above the ground. The frightful concert formed by the denizens of the forest, whom the subtlety of their scent attracted one after the other, increased more and more, and overpowered the very sound of the wind which raged in the ravines and forest clearings. The moon was once more hidden behind clouds, and Don Torribio found himself again in darkness; but if he could not dis-

tinguish the wild beasts near him, he guessed and almost smelt their presence; he saw their eyeballs flashing in the gloom, and heard their roars constantly coming nearer.

He set his feet firmly on the ground and cocked his revolver. Four shots were followed by four howls of pain, and the noise produced by branch after branch in the fall of the wounded wild cats. This attack aroused a sinister uproar. The red wolves rushed with yells on the victims, for which they contended with the urubus and vultures. A rustling in the leaves reached the ear of the brave hunter, and a mass it was impossible clearly to distinguish cleft the space and lodged with a roar on the platform. With the butt of his rifle he struck out in the darkness, and the panther, with a broken skull, rolled to the base of the rock. He heard a monstrous battle, which the cougars and wild cats waged with the wounded panther, and, intoxicated by his triumph, and even by his danger, he fired two shots into the crowd of obstinate enemies snarling below him. Suddenly all these animals, ceasing their combat as if by common consent, united against the man, their common foe, and their rage was turned against the rock from the top of which Don Torribio appeared to defy them all. They climbed up the projections. The wild cats were the first to arrive, and as fast as Torribio felled them others leaped upon him. He felt his strength and energy gradually diminishing.

This struggle of a single man against a multitude of ferocious brutes had something grand and poignant about it. Don Torribio, as if suffering from a nightmare, struggled in vain against the swarm of assailants that were constantly reinforced. He felt on his face the warm, fetid breath of the wild cats and wolves, while the roars of the cougars and the mocking mewling of the panthers filled his ears with a frightful melody that gave him a vertigo. Hundreds of eyes sparkled in the shade, and at times the heavy wings of the vultures and urubus lashed his forehead, which was bathed in a cold perspiration.

In him every feeling of self had died out. He no longer thought; his life, so to speak, had become entirely physical. His movements were mechanical, and his arms rose and fell to strike with the rigid regularity of a pendulum.

Already several claws had been buried deep in his flesh. Wild cats had seized him by the throat, and he had been compelled to struggle with them to make them loose their hold; his blood was flowing from twenty wounds, not mortal, it is true, but the hour was approaching beyond which human strength cannot go. Don Torribio would have fallen from his rock and perished under the teeth of the wild beasts.

At this solemn moment, when all seemed to desert him, a loud cry burst from his bosom—a cry of agony and despair of indefinable expression, which was echoed far and wide by the rocks. It was the last protest of the strong man who confesses himself vanquished, and who, before falling, calls his fellow-man to his aid, or implores the help of Heaven.

He cried, and a cry responded to his.

Don Torribio, amazed, and not daring to count on a miracle in a

desert which no human being had ever penetrated, believed himself under the impression of a dream or an hallucination; still, collecting all his strength, and feeling hope rekindled in his soul, he uttered a second cry, louder and more ear-piercing than the first.

"Courage!"

This time it was not echo that answered him. Courage! That one word reached him on the wings of the wind, though faint as a sigh. Like the giant Antæus, Don Torribio, drawing himself up, seemed to regain strength and recover that life which was already slipping from him. He redoubled his blows at his innumerable enemies.

Several horses were galloping in the distance; shots lit up the darkness with their transient gleams, and men, or rather demons, dashed suddenly into the thick of the wild beasts, and produced a fearful carnage.

Suddenly Don Torribio, attacked by two tiger cats, rolled on the platform, struggling with them.

The wild beasts had fled before the new-comers, who hastened to light fires to keep them at bay during the rest of the night. Two of these men, holding lighted torches, began seeking the hunter, whose cries of distress had besought their help. He was lying senseless on the platform, surrounded by ten or a dozen dead wild cats, and holding in his stiffened fingers the neck of a strangled pajirol.

"Well, Pepe," a voice said, "have you found him?"

"Yes," was the reply; "but he appears to be dead."

"Carai! that would be a pity," Pedrito continued, "for he is a fine fellow. Where is he?"

"On this rock."

"Can you bring him down with the help of Lopez?"

"Nothing easier."

"Make haste, in Heaven's name!" Pedrito said. "Each minute's delay is, perhaps, a year's life slipping from him."

Lopez and Pepe raised Don Torribio by the head and feet, and with infinite precautions transposed him from the improvised fortress where he had so long fought, and laid him on a bed of leaves Juan had got ready near one of the fires.

"Canario!" Pedrito exclaimed on seeing the gory man's miserable appearance. "Poor devil! how they have served him out; it was high time to help him."

"Do you think he will recover?" Lopez asked, eagerly.

"There is always hope," Pedrito answered sententiously, "where life is not extinct. Let us have a look at him."

He bent over the body, drew his glistening knife, and placed the blade between his lips.

"Not the slightest breath," Pedrito said, shaking his head.

"Are his wounds serious?" Lopez asked.

"I do not think so. He has been worn out by fatigue and emotion, but he will soon open his eyes again, and in a quarter of an hour, if he think proper, he can get in the saddle again. It is surely he," Pedrito added, in a low voice.

"Whence comes your thoughtful air, brother?"

"It is because this man, in spite of his European dress and thorough appearance of a white, resembles——"

"Whom?"

"The Indian chief with whom we fought at the tree of Gualichu, and to whom we owe Mercedes' safety."

"You must be mistaken."

"Not the least in the world, brothers," the eldest replied authoritatively. "When hidden in the trunk of the sacred tree, I had leisure to study his features, which have remained graven on my mind. Besides, I recognise him by this gash which I made on his face with my sabre."

"That is true," the others said in surprise.

"What is to be done?"

"What is the meaning of this disguise?"

"Heaven alone knows," Pedrito answered; "but he must be saved."

The bomberos, like all woodrangers living far from the colony, are obliged to cure their own wounds, and hence acquire a certain practical knowledge of medicine through employing the remedies and simples in use among the Indians.

Pedrito, assisted by Pepe and Juan, washed Don Torribio's wounds with rum-and-water, moistened his temples, and puffed tobacco-smoke up his nostrils. The young man gave an almost insensible sigh, stirred slightly, and opened his eyes, which wandered round vacantly.

"He is saved!" said Pedrito; "now leave Nature to act, for she is the best physician I know."

Don Torribio raised himself on his elbow, passed his hand over his forehead as if to regain his memory and thought, and said in a weak voice—

"Who are you?"

"Friends, sir—fear nothing."

"I feel as if every bone in my body were broken."

"There is no danger, sir; with the exception of the fatigue, you are as well as we are."

"I hope so, my worthy friends; but by what miracle did you arrive in time to save me?"

"Your horse performed this miracle; had it not, you were lost."

"How so?" Torribio asked, his voice growing gradually stronger, and already able to rise.

"This is how it was—we are bomberos——"

The young man gave a sort of nervous start, which he suddenly checked.

"We are bomberos, and watch the Indians, especially at night. Accident brought us to these parts. Your horse was flying with a pack of red wolves at his heels; we freed it from these brutes; then, as it seemed to us probable that a ready-saddled horse could not be without an owner in this forest, where no one ventures, we set out in search of the rider. Your cry guided us."

"How can I pay my debt to you?" Torribio asked, offering his hand to Pedrito.

"You owe us nothing, sir."

"Why?"

"Here is your horse, caballero."

"But I should like to see you again," he said, before starting.

"It is unnecessary; you owe us nothing, I tell you," said Pedrito, who held the horse by the bridle.

"What do you mean?" Don Torribio insisted.

"The bombero," Pedrito replied, "has paid to-day the debt contracted yesterday with Nocobotha the Ulmen of the Aucas."

Don Torribio's face was covered with a deadly pallor.

"We are quits, chief," Pedrito continued, as he let go the bridle.

When the rider had disappeared in the darkness, Pedrito turned to his brothers—

"I know not why it is," he said, with a sigh of relief, "but I feel happy at owing nothing to that man."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CHASE OF THE NANDUS.

At the estancia of San Julian the hours passed away pleasantly in talking and dreams of happiness, and Don Valentine shared the joy of his two children. Don Torribio, since the announcement of Dona Concha's marriage had not been seen at San Julian or Carmen, to the great amazement of everybody. Mercedes, gentle and simple, had become the friend, almost the sister, of Concha. The frank and pealing laugh of the girls cheered the echoes of the house, and caused the capataz to grow pensive, for at the sight of the bomberos' sister, he had felt his heart turn towards her, like the heliotrope to the sun. Don Blas, resembling a soul in purgatory, prowled round Mercedes at a distance, to look at her unperceived. Everybody at the estancia had observed the worthy man's distress, and he alone, in spite of his heavy sighs, did not know what it all meant. They ventured to ridicule him, though without wounding his feelings, and laugh at his singular ways.

One fresh November morning, shortly after sunrise, there was a great commotion at the estancia of San Julian. Several horses, held by black slaves, were stamping impatiently at the foot of the steps; servants were running backwards and forwards; and Don Blas, dressed in his best clothes, was awaiting his master's arrival.

At length Don Valentine and Don Sylbio appeared, accompanied by

the two ladies. At the sight of Mercedes the capataz felt fire rise from his heart to his face ; he drew himself up, curled his moustache carefully, and gave his well-beloved a tender and respectful glance.

"Good day, Blas, my friend," Don Valentine said to him cordially. "I fancy we shall have a fine day's sport."

"I think so too, excellency ; the weather is superb."

"Have you chosen quiet horses for my daughter and her companion?"

"Oh, excellency," the capataz answered, "I lassoed them myself on the corral. I answer for them, or my head. They are real ladies' horses—lambs."

"We are easy in mind," said Dona Concha, "for we know that Don Blas spoils us."

"Come, to horse, and let us start."

"Yes, it is a long ride from here to the plain of the nandus" (a species of the ostrich), said Blas, with an affectionate glance at Mercedes.

The little party, composed of twenty well-armed men, proceeded to the battery, where Patito lowered the drawbridge.

"You must double your vigilance," the capataz said to Patito.

"Don't be alarmed, Senor Blas. Good luck to you and the honourable company," Patito added, waving his hat in the air.

"Raise the drawbridge, Patito."

"Any one who gets into the estancia, capataz, will be sharper than you and I."

In Patagonia, at a short distance from the rivers, all plains are alike—sand, ever sand, and here and there stunted bushes. Such was the road to the plain of the nandus.

Don Valentine had invited his future son-in-law to an ostrich-hunt, and, as may be supposed, Conchita wished to be one of the party.

Ostrich-hunting is one of the great amusements of the Spaniards in Patagonia and the Argentine Republic, where those birds are found in great numbers.

The ostriches usually live in small families of eight or ten, scattered along the edges of marshes, pools, and lakes ; and they feed on fresh grass. Faithful to the native nook they never leave the vicinity of the water, and in the month of November they lay their eggs, which are frequently fifty to sixty in number, in the wildest part of the desert, and only sit on them at night. When incubation is over, the bird breaks with its beak the addled eggs, which are at once covered with flies and insects that serve as food for the young.

A characteristic feature of the manners of the ostrich is their extreme curiosity. At the estancias, where they live in a domestic state, it is not uncommon to see them stalking about among the groups and looking at people who are conversing together. On the plains their curiosity is often fatal to them, for they come up without hesitation to investigate everything that appears to them strange. Here is a rather good Indian story referring to this. The cougars lie down on the ground, raise their tail in the air, and wave it in all directions. The ostriches, attracted by the sight of this strange object, come up in their sim-

plicity; the rest can be guessed—they become victims to the tricks of the cougars.

The hunters, after a quick ride for nearly two hours, reached the plain of the nandus. The ladies dismounted on the bank of a stream, and four men, with their rifles on their hips, remained with them. The hunters then divided into two equal bands. The first, commanded by Don Valentine, entered the plain, forming a semicircle, so as to drive the game into a ravine situated between two sand ridges. The second band, having at its head Don Sylvio, formed a long line, which constituted the other moiety of the circle. This circle was gradually contracted by the advance of the horsemen, when a dozen ostriches showed themselves; but the male bird, that stood as a sentry, warned the family of its danger, by a cry sharp as a boatswain's whistle.

All the hunters started after them at a gallop, and the hitherto silent plain became very animated.

The horsemen pursued the luckless birds at the full speed of their steeds, and raised clouds of fine dust as they passed.

Several families of ostriches had got up, and the chase soon grew most exciting. Yells and shouts were heard all around; the bolas whistled through the air, and twined round the necks and legs of the ostriches, which, wild with terror, made a thousand feints and turns to escape, and tried, by flapping their wings, to wound the horses with the spike with which the extremity of their wings is armed.

Some fifteen ostriches strewed the plain when Don Valentine gave the signal to retreat. The birds which had not fallen hurried with wings and feet to a place of safety. The dead were carefully picked up, for the ostrich is excellent eating, and the Americans prepare from the meat off the breast a dish renowned for its delicacy.

The peons went to look for the eggs, which are also highly esteemed.

Although the hunt had only lasted an hour, the horses were panting; hence the return to the estancia took place but slowly. The hunters did not return till a little before sunset.

"Well, Patito," asked Don Valentine, "has anything of importance happened?"

"Nothing, excellency!" Patito replied. "A gaucho, who said he had come from Carmen, insisted on being let in to speak with Don Sylvio."

This gaucho, for whom Patito had been very careful not to lower the drawbridge, was his dear and honest friend Corrocho, who, it may be remembered, wanted to kill him cleverly. Corrocho had gone off in a very bad temper, without leaving any message.

"What do you think about this gaucho's arrival, Don Sylvio?" Don Valentine asked, when they were comfortably seated in the drawing-room.

"It does not surprise me," Sylvio answered. "My own house is being got ready at Carmen, and, no doubt, my orders are wanted."

"That is possible."

"I am hurrying on the workmen, father. I am so eager to be

married that I fear lest my happiness should slip from my grasp," said Don Sylvio.

"And I, too," said Dona Concha.

"There is a little goose," said Don Valentine. "The hearts of girls are at work when you least expect it. Patience, miss, for three days longer."

"My good father!" Conchita cried, as she hid her face in Don Valentine's bosom.

"Oh! in that case I will start to-morrow for Carmen, especially as I am awaiting from Buenos Ayres papers indispensable for our marriage," Don Sylvio added.

"I hope," she said, "you will start very early, so as to return next day."

"I shall be here to-morrow evening. Can I remain long away from you, my dear Concha?"

"No, Don Sylvio, no, I implore you. I do not wish you to return at night."

"Why not?" the young man asked.

"I really cannot tell you; but I feel frightened at the thought of your crossing the pampa by night."

"Oh!" she continued, seeing Don Sylvio about to speak, "I know that you are brave, almost too brave; but gaucho bandits abound in the plain. Do not expose a life which is so dear to me, which is no longer your own, Sylvio."

"Thanks, Conchita. Still I have no one to fear in this country, where I am a stranger. Moreover, I never leave the estancia without looking like a theatrical bandit, so covered am I with weapons."

"No matter," Dona Concha continued; "if you love me, you must take pity on my anxiety, and—obey."

"Come, come!" said Don Valentine, with a laugh. "On my soul, you are mad, Conchita, and your romances have turned your head."

"What would you have, father? Is it my fault? The foreboding of a coming misfortune agitates me, and I wish to leave nothing to chance."

"Do not cry, my darling child," the father said to Concha, as she burst into tears. "Kiss me. Your betrothed and myself will do all you please."

"Do you really mean it?" Dona Concha asked.

"On my honour."

"Then," Don Valentine said, gaily, "all is for the best. I suspect, Conchita, that you are somewhat jealous, and afraid of losing Sylvio."

"Perhaps so," she said, maliciously.

"Such things have happened," her father said, teasingly. "So, Don Sylvio, you intend starting to-morrow morning?"

"At sunrise, in order to avoid the great heat; and, as I do not hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again before I go, I will take leave at once."

"Kiss one another, children! When persons part, especially if they

love, they ought to embrace as if they were never going to meet again."

"Really, father," said Conchita, "you have such ideas—"

"I was only in fun, my dear child."

"Pleasant journey, Don Sylvio; and we shall see you again the day after to-morrow."

"You may be sure of that."

The next morning at sunrise Don Sylvio d'Arenal left the estancia. At the bottom of the steps the capataz and two peons were waiting for him.

"Farewell," said Dona Concha, from her window, with some emotion in her voice.

"Farewell," Sylvio replied, wafting her a kiss, "till we meet again."

"That is true," she said. "We shall soon meet again."

The capataz gave a heavy sigh; he was doubtless thinking of Mercedes, and saying to himself that Don Sylvio was a very lucky man.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TOLDERIA.

ON the banks of the Rio Negro, about five-and-twenty leagues from Carmen, stood the village of Guanacos.

It was a simple temporary encampment, composed of about one hundred chocas, or cabins, irregularly grouped one after the other.

In front of the entrance of the chocas the lances of the warriors were fixed in the ground. These lances were light, and made of flexible bamboos, sixteen to eighteen feet in length, and armed at their extremity with a spear a foot long.

The liveliest joy appeared to prevail in the tolderia. In some chocas Indian women, provided with spindles, were winding wool; in others women were weaving those ponchos so renowned for their delicacy and perfection of work.

The young men of the tribe, assembled at the centre of the tolderia in a large square, were playing at *pilma*. The players trace a large circle on the ground, which they enter and range themselves in two rows facing each other. The champions of each party holding a ball full of air in their hands, one side on the right, the other on the left hand, throw these balls before them. They raise the left leg, catch the projectile in their

hand, and throw it at the adversary, whom they must hit on the body under penalty of losing one point.

Other Indians of a riper age were gravely playing a sort of game at cards with squares of leather.

In a *choca*, larger and better painted than the rest, which was the abode of the *carasken*, or first chief, whose lances, covered at the end with red-stained leather, were the distinctive mark of power, three men were sitting over a decaying fire, and talking regardless of the noises outside. These men were Nocobotha, Pincheira, and Churlakin, whose squaw had given birth that same morning to a son, which was the cause of the great rejoicings.

Churlakin received the orders of the great chief for the ceremonies usual on such occasions, bowed respectfully, and left the *choca*, which he soon re-entered, followed by his wives and all his friends, one of whom held the infant in his arms.

Nocobotha placed himself between Pincheira and Churlakin, at the head of the party, and proceeded towards the Rio Negro. The new-born babe, wrapped in woollen swaddling clothes, was plunged into the water, and then they returned in the same order to Churlakin's *choca*, in front of which lay a plump filly, thrown down, and with its four feet secured.

A poncho was spread under the animal's belly, and the relations and friends deposited on it, one after the other, the presents intended for the child, consisting of spurs, weapons, and clothes. Nocobotha, who had consented to act as godfather, placed the infant in the midst of the presents; and Churlakin laid open the filly's flanks, tore out its heart, and handed it, while still warm, to Nocobotha, who employed it to make a cross on the infant's forehead, while saying, "Your name will be Churlakincko." The father took the child back, and the chief, raising the bleeding heart, said thrice in a loud voice, "Let him live! let him live! let him live!" Then he recommended the child to Gualichu, the genius of evil, praying him to render him brave and eloquent, and terminated the enunciation of his vows with the words, "Above all, let him never become a slave."

When the ceremony was ended, the filly was cut into pieces, large fires were kindled, and all the relations and friends began a feast which would last until the immolated filly had entirely disappeared.

After some conversation Nocobotha said—

"Brothers, you are my confidants, and my heart is laid open before you, to enable you to see my secret thoughts. You were, perhaps, surprised to-night at finding that I did not count you among the chiefs selected to act under my orders."

The two chiefs gave a nod of denial.

"You neither doubted my friendship, nor supposed that I had withdrawn my confidence. I reserve you two for more important enterprises, which require sure and well-tried men. You, Churlakin, will moun' without delay. Here is the quipus."

And he handed the ulmen a small piece of willow wood, ten inches long and four wide, split down the centre, and holding a human finger. This piece of wood, covered with thread, was fringed with

red, blue, black, and white wool. Churlakin received the quipus respectfully.

"Churlakin," Nocobotha continued, "you will serve me as casqui (herald), not to the Patagonian natives of the pampas, whose caraskens, ulmens, and apo-ulmens were present at the solemn meeting at the tree of Gualichu, although you may communicate with them on your road; but I send you specially to the nations and tribes scattered far away, and living in the woods, such as the Ranqueles, the Guerandis, the Moluchos, and the Pecunches, to whom you will present the quipus. Turning back thence to the desert, you will visit the Charruas, Bocobis, Tebas, and Guaramis, who can place about twenty-five thousand warriors under arms. The task is difficult and delicate, and that is why I entrust it to you, whom I regard as my second self."

"My brother's mind can be at rest," Churlakin said, "I shall succeed."

"Good," Nocobotha continued, "I have made nineteen knots on the black wool to indicate that my brother left my side on the nineteenth day of the moon; on the white wool twenty-seven knots, to signify that in twenty-seven days the warriors will assemble under arms on the Island of Ghole-Isechel, at the fork of the Rio Negro. The chiefs who consent to join us will make a knot on the blood-red wool, and those who refuse will knot the red and blue wool together. Has my brother understood?"

"Yes," Churlakin answered. "When must I start?"

"At once, for time presses."

"In ten minutes I shall be far from the village," said Churlakin, as he bowed to the two chiefs and left the choca.

"And now it is our turn," Nocobotha said, with a friendly accent, when he found himself alone with Pincheira.

"I am listening."

The superior chief, then putting off the composed manner and language of an ulmen, employed the European style with surprising readiness, and laying aside the Indian dialect, addressed the Chilian officer in the purest Castilian spoken from Cape Horn to Magellan.

"My dear Pincheira," he continued, "during the two years since my return from Europe, I have attached to myself most of the Carmen gauchos—utter scoundrels, I allow—and bandits exiled from the cities; but I can count on them, and they are devoted to me. These men only know me by the name of Don Torribio Carvajal."

"I was aware of the fact," Pincheira said.

"Ah!" Nocobotha remarked, darting a glance of suspicion at the other.

"Everything is known on the pampa."

"In a word," Nocobotha continued, "the hour has now arrived when I must reap what I have sown among these bandits, who will be useful to us against their countrymen, through their knowledge of the Spanish tactics and their skill in the use of fire-arms. Reasons which would take me too long to explain prevent me from turning my attention to the gauchos, so you will introduce yourself to them in my name. This

ring," he added, drawing one from his finger, "will be your passport; they are warned, and if you show it to them, they will obey you as myself. They assemble at a low pulberia in the Poblacion del Sur, at Carmen."

"I know it well. What am I to do with the fellows?"

"A very simple matter. Every day a devoted man, Panchito by name, will transmit you my orders, and inform you of what is going on among us. Your duty will be to hold these bandits in readiness, and on a day I shall indicate to you you will stir up a revolt in Carmen. This revolt will give us time to act outside, while a part of your people are scouring the pampas, and freeing us, if possible, from those infernal bomberos, who watch our manœuvres, and are almost as crafty as our Indians."

"Confound it," said Pincheira, "that is a tough job."

"You will succeed, if not through friendship for me, at least through hatred of the Spaniards."

"Not to deceive your expectations, I will do more than man can do."

"I know it, and thank you, my dear Pincheira. But you must be prudent and skilful! Our plans are suspected, and we are watched. To employ an Indian metaphor, I trust to you a mole's job. You must dig a mine under Carmen, which will blow them all up when it explodes."

"Carai," said Pincheira, as he warmly pressed Nocobotha's hand, "you are one of the men I like. Trust to me, to my friendship, and, above all, to my hatred."

"We shall all be avenged," Nocobotha added. "May Satan hear you!"

"To work, then! but, in the first place, lay aside your uniform as a Chilian officer. Disguise yourself as well as you can, for your face is familiar at Carmen."

"Yes," Pincheira replied, "and in an hour you will not recognise me yourself. I will dress myself as a gaucho, for that will not be noticed. Farewell."

"One word yet."

"Say it."

"The man I send to you will arrange a fresh meeting-place for every night in order to foil the spies."

"All right."

"Good-bye."

Pincheira left the choca; and the Indian chief looked after him for a moment.

"Go," he said, "ferocious brute, to whom I throw a people as a prey. Go! miserable instrument of projects whose greatness you do not understand," he added, as he looked at the Indians, "they are making holiday, playing like children, and unsuspecting that I am about to make them free. But it is time for me to think of vengeance."

And he quitted the choca, leapt on a horse, which an Indian held by the bridle, and started at a gallop on the road to Carmen.

At the end of an hour he stopped on the banks of the Rio Negro, dismounted, assured himself by a glance that he was alone, took off a leathern valise fastened to his saddle, and entered a natural grotto a few paces distant. There he quickly doffed his Indian garb, dressed in handsome European attire, and set out again.

It was no longer Nocobotha, the supreme chief of the Indian nations, but Don Torribio Carvajal, the mysterious Spaniard. His pace was also prudently altered, and his horse carried him at a gentle trot towards Carmen.

On coming near the spot where, on the previous evening, the bomberos had halted with their sister to hold a consultation, he dismounted again, sat down on the grass, and took from a splendid cigar-case made of plaited Panama straw, a cigar, which he lit with the apparent tranquility of a tourist who is resting in the shade, and is admiring the beauty of the scenery.

During this time the footfall of several horses disturbed the solitude of the pampa, and a hoarse voice struck up an Indian song well known on this border—

"I have lost my Neculantey in the country of Tilqui. Oh! ye damp plains which have changed him into shadows and flies."

"Oh, oh! the song of the Maukawis already!" Don Torribio said, in a loud voice.

"Does not the note of the Maukawis announce sunrise?" the voice asked.

"You are right, Panchito," Don Torribio replied, "we are alone, so you can come as well as your comrade, who, I suppose, is your friend Corrocho."

"You have guessed right, excellency," said Corrocho, as he came from behind a sand-hill.

"Faithful to our word," said Panchito, "we have arrived at the spot and hour appointed."

"That is well, my good fellows, and thanks. Come here, but remain on horseback. Are you both devoted to me?"

"To the last drop of our blood, excellency," the two gauchos said.

"And you do not despise money?"

"Money can only injure those who have none," the sententious Panchito remarked.

"When it is honourably gained," Corrocho added, with an ape-like grimace.

"Of course, of course," the young man said; "it is a matter of fifty ounces."

The two bandits had a shudder of joy, and their tiger-cat eyeballs flashed.

"Carai," they said.

"Does that suit you?"

"Fifty ounces? Of course it is a tough job."

"Perhaps so."

"No odds?"

"There will be a man to kill."

"All the worse for him," said Panchito.

"Does it suit you still?"

"More than ever," Corrocho grunted.

"In that case listen to me attentively," Don Torribio Carvajal said.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PAMPERO.

DURING the whole course of their journey, which lasted two hours, Don Sylvio and Don Blas did not exchange a single word, to the great surprise of the capataz. Don Sylvio was thinking of his approaching happiness, which was slightly overclouded through the sadness of the leave-taking and Dona Concha's presentiments. But these vague alarms were dissipated like the morning mist by the sun, so soon as he arrived at El Carmen.

Don Sylvio's first care was to visit the house to which he would lead Dona Concha after the nuptial ceremony was performed. Though comfort does not exist in South America, it was a fairy palace, thronged with all the splendours of luxury. A number of French, English, and Italian workmen, collected with extraordinary difficulty, were toiling without relaxation, under the orders of a skilful architect, in putting the final touch to this creation out of the "Arabian Nights," which had already swallowed up large sums, and which would be in a condition to receive its new hosts within eight-and-forty hours. At Carmen nothing was talked of but the splendour of Don Sylvio d'Arenal's palace; the curious crowd that collected in front of the gates related marvels about this princely residence.

Don Sylvio, satisfied at seeing his dream accomplished, smiled as he thought of his betrothed, and after complimenting the architect and the workmen, proceeded to pay a visit to the governor, where important business summoned him.

The commander gave the young man, with whose father he had been intimate, a gracious reception. Still, in spite of the courteous manner of Don Antonio Valverde, Sylvio fancied he could notice traces of secret annoyance in his face.

The governor was a brave and honourable soldier, who had rendered good service in the War of Independence, and the Government had placed him on honourable half-pay, by entrusting to him the command of Carmen, a post he had held for fifteen years. Courageous, strict, and

just, the commandant kept the gauchos in order by the punishment of the *garota*, and foiled the repeated attempts of the Indians, who came even under the guns of the fortress, to harry cattle and carry off prisoners, especially women. Gifted with but a poor intellect, but supported by his own experience, and the esteem of all the honest people in the colony, he was not deficient in a certain energy of character. Physically, he was a tall, stout man, with a rubicund, pimpled face, full of self-satisfaction, who listened to people speaking, and carefully weighed his words, as if they were made of gold.

Don Sylvio, as we have said, was surprised at the anxiety which disturbed the colonel's face.

"It is a miracle," the latter said, "to see you here."

"In a few days you will not be able to reproach me thus," Don Sylvio replied.

"Then it is coming off soon?" Don Antonio said, rubbing his hands.

"Yes, I hope to be married within four days. I have come to Carmen to-day to give the master's look at the final arrangements of my house."

"All the better," the commandant replied; "I am enchanted that you are about to marry the prettiest girl in the colony."

"I thank you in her name, colonel."

"Do you spend the day at Carmen?"

"Yes, and I intend returning to the estancia at an early hour to-morrow."

"In that case you will breakfast with me without ceremony?"

"Willingly."

"That is famous," the commandant said, as he rang a bell.

A peon appeared.

"This gentleman will breakfast with me. By-the-bye, Don Sylvio, I have a large packet of papers addressed to you, which arrived last night."

"Heaven be praised! I feared some delay. These papers are indispensable for our marriage."

"All is for the best," Don Antonio remarked.

The young man placed the packet in his coat-pocket, and the peon opened the door again.

"Your excellency is served," he said.

A third guest was waiting for them in the dining-room. It was Major Bloomfield, an Englishman, who had been second in command at Carmen for twenty years. Don Antonio and the major had fought side by side in their youth, and had a fraternal attachment. They sat down, after the usual ceremony, to an abundantly and delicately-covered table, and at the dessert the conversation became thoroughly friendly.

"By the way," Don Sylvio asked, "what is the matter with you, Don Antonio? you do not seem in your usual good spirits."

"That is true," the commandant said, as he sipped a glass of Xeres; "I am sad."

"You sad? hang it, you alarm me; if I had not seen you breakfast with such a good appetite, I should fancy you ill."

"Yes," the old soldier answered, with a sigh; "my appetite is all right."

"What else can annoy you?"

"A foreboding," the commandant said, seriously.

"A foreboding!" Don Sylvio repeated, remembering Dona Concha's parting words.

"I too, feel anxious, in spite of myself," the major added; "there is something. A danger is suspended over our heads, but whence it will come the Lord alone knows."

"Yes," said Don Antonio, "He knows; and, believe me, Don Sylvio, He gives warnings to men."

"Major Bloomfield and you, both old soldiers, brave as your swords, cannot be frightened at a shadow; so what are your reasons?"

"I have none," said the colonel; "still—"

"Come, come, Don Antonio," Sylvio remarked, gaily, "you are suffering from the blue devils. Take my advice, colonel; have yourself bled, and in two days the fog over your imagination will be dissipated. Do you not agree with me, major?"

"I wish it may be so," the old officer answered, with a shake of his head.

"Nonsense!" Sylvio remarked, "life is too short as it is, then why sadden it with chimeras?"

"On the frontier men can be sure of nothing."

"The Indians have become lambs."

"Excellency," a peon said, opening the door, "a bombero, who has arrived at full speed, requests an interview."

The three gentlemen looked at one another.

"Let him come in," the colonel said.

Heavy footsteps echoed in the passage, and the bombero appeared; it was Pedro. He certainly had at this moment the look of a bearer of ill-tidings, and seemed to have just come out of a fight. His ragged clothes were stained with blood and mud, an unusual pallor covered his face, and he leant on his rifle, for he was exhausted by his hurried ride.

"Take this glass of wine," said Don Sylvio: "it will restore you."

"No," Pedro answered, thrusting the glass away, "it is not wine I thirst for, but blood."

The bombero wiped his dank forehead with the back of his hand, and said, in a sharp, quick voice, which conveyed terror to the hearts of the three hearers—

"The Indians are coming down."

"Have you seen them?" the major asked.

"Yes," he replied, hoarsely.

"When?"

"This morning."

"Far from here?"

"Twenty leagues."

"How many are there?"

"Count the grains of the sand on the pampa, and you will have their number."

"Nonsense!" the colonel exclaimed: "that is impossible; the Indians cannot thus organise an army at a day's notice. Terror must have made you see double."

"Terror, nonsense!" the bombero answered; "in the desert we know it not."

"But, tell me, how are they coming?"

"Like a hurricane, burning and plundering everything on their passage. They form a vast semicircle, whose two extremities are gradually drawing nearer to Carmen. They act with a certain method, under the orders of a chief who is, doubtless, practised and skilful."

"That is serious," the commandant said.

The major shook his head.

"Why did you warn us so late?" he said to the bombero.

"This morning at sunrise my three brothers and I were surrounded by two or three hundred Indians, who seemed to emerge suddenly from the ground. What a fight it was! We defended ourselves like lions; Juan is dead, Pepe and Lopez are wounded, but we escaped at last, and here I am."

"Return to your post as speedily as possible; a fresh horse will be given to you."

"I am off."

"Well," said Don Antonio, after Pedrito had retired, "what do you think of our presentiments, Don Sylvio? But where are you going?" he asked the young man, who had risen from his chair.

"I shall return to the estancia of San Julian, which the Indians have perhaps attacked. Oh, Dona Conchita!"

"San Julian is fortified, and safe against surprise. Still, try and induce Don Valentine and his daughter to return to Carmen, where they will be in greater security."

"Thanks, colonel, I will try; and do you offer a bold front to the enemy. As you are aware, the Indians only attempt surprises, and so soon as they see that their plans are discovered they are off again."

"May heaven hear you."

"Good-bye for the present, gentlemen, and I wish you success," said the young man, as he pressed the hands of the two old soldiers.

Don Blas Sallazar, who was waiting for Don Sylvio in the courtyard, ran up to him so soon as he perceived him.

"Well," the capataz said, "you know the news. The Indians are making a descent."

"I have just been told so."

"What are we going to do?"

"Return to the estancia."

"Hum, Don Sylvio, that is not at all prudent; the Indians will doubtless bar our way."

"We will pass over their bodies."

"Of course, of course; but suppose they kill you?"

"Nonsense! Dona Concha is expecting me."

"As you please," the capataz answered; "all is ready for our departure; the horses are here, saddled and all. Let us be off."

"Thank you, Blas, you are a good fellow," Sylvio said, as he held out his hand to him."

"I am aware of it."

"Off we go."

Don Sylvio and Blas, escorted by the two men, walked their horses through the crowd of idlers who had assembled in front of the fortress to hear the news; then they went at a sharp trot down the rather steep hill that leads from the citadel to old Carmen, and at length galloped towards San Julian.

They had not noticed the behaviour of sundry suspicious-looking fellows, who had followed them at a distance ever since they started, and were talking eagerly together.

The weather was stormy, and the clouds were gray and low. The air seemed motionless, a deep silence brooded over the solitude; a white cloud, light as a sand-rift, collected in the south-west, which advanced, and each moment grew larger. All announced the approach of the simoom of the pampas.

The clouds collected, the dust rose and ran along in dense columns, suspended between earth and sky. The clouds enveloped the plain as in a mantle, whose corners the gusts lifted at every moment, and which lightning-flashes rent here and there. Puffs of hot air traversed the space, and suddenly the tempest rushed up furiously from the horizon, sweeping the pampa with irresistible violence. The light was obscured by masses of sand; a thick gloom covered the earth, and the thunder mingled its terrible artillery with the howling of the hurricane. Enormous masses were detached from the lofty cliffs, and fell with a frightful din into the sea.

The travellers got off their horses, and sheltered themselves behind rocks on the sea-shore. When the worst of the storm had passed, they set out again, Don Sylvio and Blas riding silently side by side, while the two peons, twenty yards ahead, trembled at the thought of seeing the Indians.

The storm had slightly diminished in intensity, the simoom had carried its fury further, but the rain fell in torrents, and thunder and lightning followed each other uninterruptedly. The travellers could not continue their journey, for they ran the risk of being thrown at every moment by their horses, which reared in affright. The ground and the sand, moistened by the rain, did not offer a single spot where the brutes could set their feet in safety; they stumbled, slipped, and threatened to fall.

"Whatever we may do," said the capataz, "it is impossible to go any further, so we had better halt again, and seek refuge under that clump of trees."

"Very good," Don Sylvio said, with a sigh of resignation.

The little party at once proceeded towards a wood that bordered the road. They were only some fifteen paces from it when four men, whose faces were concealed by black masks, dashed out of the wood at a gallop, and silently attacked the travellers.

The peons rolled off their horses, struck by two bullets the strangers

had fired, and writhed on the ground in convulsions of agony. Don Sylvio and Blas Sallazar, astonished at this sudden attack on the part of men who could not be Indians, for they wore the dress of gauchos, and their hands were white, immediately dismounted, and making a rampart of their horses, awaited the attack of their adversaries with levelled rifles.

Bullets were exchanged on both sides, and a fierce combat, silent and unequal, began; one of the assailants fell with his skull cleft to the teeth; and Don Sylvio passed his sword through the chest of another.

"Well, my masters," he shouted to them, "have you had enough? or does another of you wish to form the acquaintance of my blade? You are fools: ten of you should have come to assassinate us."

"What!" added the capataz, "are you going to give in already? you are clumsy fellows for cut-throats, and the man who pays you ought to have made a better choice."

The two masked men had fallen back; but immediately four other men, also masked, appeared, and all six rushed at the Spaniards, who firmly awaited the attack.

"Hang it! pardon our having calumniated you; you know your trade," said Don Blas, as he fired a pistol into the thick of his adversaries.

The others, still silent, returned the fire, and the fight began again with fresh fury. But the two brave Spaniards, whose strength was exhausted, and whose blood was flowing, fell in their turn on the corpses of two other assailants, whom they sacrificed to their rage before succumbing.

So soon as the strangers saw Don Sylvio and Blas were motionless, they uttered a cry of triumph. Paying no heed to the capataz, they raised Don Sylvio d'Arenal's body, laid it across their horses, and fled away at full speed along the devious path.

Several corpses strewed the ground. After the assailants the vultures arrived, which hovered and circled above the victims, and mingled their hoarse croaks of triumph with the sound of the hurricane.

CHAPTER XIV.

PREPARATIONS FOR A SIEGE.

"It is a heavy blow," the governor said, after Don Sylvio had left the room; "but, viva Dios! the pagans shall find some one to talk to."

Major, warn the officers to assemble at once for a council of war, so that we may arrange the defensive operations."

"That is the plan," the major answered; "I am satisfied with you. You draw yourself up haughtily, and I find you again, at last, my dear fellow."

"Ah! my dear Bloomfield, the presentiment of an unknown misfortune depresses one's courage, while danger, however great it may be, once we have it face to face, ceases to cause terror."

"You are right," said the major, who left the room to carry out his chief's orders.

The officers of the garrison were soon assembled in the governor's rooms.

"Sit down, caballeros," he said to them: "you are doubtless aware of the motive of this meeting. The Indians are threatening the colony, and a powerful league has been formed among the Patagonians. What forces have we at our disposal?"

"We are not deficient in arms and ammunition," the major replied. "We have more than two hundred thousand cartridges, and abundance of muskets, pistols, sabres, and lances; and our guns are amply supplied with round shot and canister."

"Very good."

"Unfortunately," the major continued, "our troops—"

"How many have we?"

"Our effective strength should be one hundred and twenty, but death, illness, and desertion, have reduced it to scarce eighty."

"Eighty!" the colonel said, with a shake of his head. "In the presence of a formidable invasion, as the common safety is at stake, can we not compel the inhabitants to get under arms?"

"It is their duty," one of the officers said.

"An imposing force must crown our walls," Don Antonio continued; "and this is what I propose. All the peons will be enlisted, and formed into a company; the merchants will form a separate corps; the gauchos, well armed and mounted, will defend the approaches to the town, and act as patrols outside. We shall thus muster seven hundred men, a sufficient force to repulse the Indians."

"You know, colonel," an officer objected, "that the gauchos are utter scoundrels, and that the least disturbance is to them an excuse for plundering."

"On that account they will be employed for the external defence. They will be encamped outside the colony, and, to diminish the chances of revolt amongst them, they will be divided into two squadrons, one of which will scout while the other is resting. In this way we shall have nothing to fear from them."

"As for the creoles and strangers residing in the colony," the major remarked, "I think it will be as well to give them orders to come to the fortress every night to be armed in case of necessity."

"Excellent. The number of bomberos will be doubled to prevent a surprise, and barricades raised at each entrance of the town to protect us from the terrible charges of the Indians."

"If that is your opinion, colonel," the major interrupted, "a sure man ought to be sent off to the estancias, to tell them to seek refuge in Carmen, when they are warned of the approach of the enemy by three cannon-shots."

"Do so, major, for the poor people would be pitilessly massacred by the savages. The inhabitants of the town must also be warned that all their females must withdraw into the fort when the pagans come in sight, unless they wish them to fall into the hands of the Indians. In the last invasion, if you remember, they carried off upwards of two hundred. And now, gentlemen, all that is left to us is to do our duty truly, and confide in the will of Heaven."

The officers rose, and were about to take leave of their chief, when a peon announced another bombero.

"Show him in, and pray be seated again, caballeros."

The scout was Pepe, Pedrito's brother. Although he had started five hours after his brother from their place of ambush, he was scarce an hour behind him. His great pace indicated the gravity of the news he brought. He had retained his cunning look, although his face was pale, blood-stained, and black with gunpowder. His torn clothes, the handkerchief fastened round his head, his arm in a sling, but, above all, four scalps hanging from his girdle, showed that he had ridden through the Indians in order to reach Carmen.

"Pepe," the governor said to him, "your brother has just left me."

"I know it, colonel."

"Is your news worse than his?"

"That depends on the way in which you take it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why," the bombero said, carelessly, "if you are fond of your ease, I have not come to reassure you; if you feel a desire to mount your horse and to see the foe you will have no occasion to indulge your fancy, as what I have to tell will cause you immense pleasure."

In spite of the gravity of the circumstances, and the anxiety of his hearers, they smiled at Pepe's singular arguments.

"Explain yourself Pepe," the governor said to him.

"Ten minutes after my brother's departure," the bombero went on, "I examined some bushes which I had seen moving in an unusual manner. I discovered a peon, who was pale in spite of his black hide, and whose tongue terror appeared to have tied. At length he made up his mind to speak. He belonged to a poor old gentleman of the name of Ignacio Bayal, one of the two men who alone escaped from the massacre of San Jose, during the last invasion. The peon and his master were gathering wood, when the Indians appeared a short distance off; the peon had time to conceal himself behind a pile of *bisacha*, but the old man fell beneath the blows of the savages, who attacked him with lances and *bolas perdidas*. I began reassuring the negro, but at the same moment perceived a multitude of Indians driving prisoners and cattle before them, burning and destroying everything as they passed in full march on Carmen. The estancia of Punta Rosa and that of San Blas are at this moment a

pile of ashes, and serve as tombs to the owners. That is my news, excellency, and you can do what you like with it."

"And those bleeding scalps?" the major asked, pointing to the human trophies that hung from the bombero's belt.

"That is a personal matter," Pepe replied, with a smile. "Through friendship for the Indians, I preferred to lift their hair rather than leave them my head."

"Perhaps it is only a band of plunderers of the pampas, who have come to steal cattle, and will retire with their booty."

"Hum," said Pete, with a shake of his head, "they are too numerous, too well equipped, and are advancing with too much regularity. No, colonel, it is not a skirmish, but an invasion."

"Thanks, Pepe," the colonel said; "I am satisfied with you. Return to your post, and redouble your vigilance."

"Juan is dead, colonel, and that will tell you how fond my brothers and I are of the Indians."

The bombero retired.

"You see, gentlemen," said Don Antonio, "that time presses. Go all of you to your duties."

"One moment," said Major Bloomfield; "I have one more suggestion to make."

"Speak, my friend."

"We are, so to speak, lost in this corner of the earth, and remote from any help; we may be besieged in Carmen, and forced into surrender by starvation. Under these imperious circumstances, I ask that a ship should be sent to head-quarters to describe our situation and request reinforcements."

"What do you think, gentlemen, of the major's suggestion?" the colonel asked, looking inquiringly at the officers.

"It is excellent, colonel, excellent," one of them answered.

"The suggestion will be carried out at once," Don Antonio continued; "and now, gentlemen, you can withdraw."

The defence of the fort and town was organised with a rapidity inconceivable to any one acquainted with Spanish sloth; danger gave courage to the timid, and doubled the ardour of the others. Two hours later the cattle had been driven in, the streets barricaded, the guns sponged out, and the women and children shut up in buildings adjoining the fort; a vessel was sailing away, and one hundred and fifty resolute men were intrenched at Poblacion del Sur, the houses of which they had loopholed.

The governor and Major Bloomfield seemed to be everywhere at once; encouraging the troops, ordering the workmen, and imparting energy to all.

About three in the afternoon a violent breeze sprang up, which bore from the south-west the smoke occasioned by firing the country, and hiding distant objects. The inhabitants of Carmen were devoured with anxiety.

Such is the simple and ingenious plan the southern nations employ to favour their invasion of the territory of the whites to hide their

manœuvres, and conceal their numbers from the piercing eyes of the bomberos. The smoke, like a floating wall, separated the Indians from Carmen, and in consequence of the brightness of the nights they had selected the period of the full moon.

The scouts, in spite of the dense smoke that protected the enemy, arrived at a gallop one after the other, and announced that they would be before Carmen during the night. In fact, the Indian hordes, whose numbers incessantly increased, covered the whole extent of the plain, and advanced on the town with startling rapidity.

By the governor's orders the three alarm-shots were fired, and the farmers could be seen flocking up, driving their cattle before them, and, on seeing their houses fired and their rich crops destroyed, they shed tears of despair.

The consternation and terror were general ; on all sides could be heard lamentations and sobs ; the night came to add its horrors to the situation. Numerous patrols traversed the streets, and, at intervals, daring bomberos slipped furtively out of the city to watch the approach of the enemy.

About two in the morning a slight sound was audible, at first almost imperceptible, but which was every moment augmented, and, as if by enchantment, the Aucas crowned the top of the barricades, waving lighted torches and uttering their war-yell.

For a moment the inhabitants fancied the town captured ; but Major Bloomfield, who commanded the post, was on his guard. At the moment when the Aucas prepared to escalate the barricades a sharp fusillade broke out, which hurled them to the foot of the entrenchments.

As the Indian surprise had failed, they would, it was supposed, withdraw, but at daybreak, however, all the illusions of the inhabitants were dissipated—the enemy had not thought of retreating.

It was a heartrending sight ! The country was devastated, and the expiring flames could still be seen in the distance. Here, a band of Aucas were driving horses off ; there, warriors, with lances erect, were watching the movements of the towns people ; behind them squaws and children were driving cattle, which uttered long lowings ; here and there prisoners, men, women, and children, forced along by blows with lance-staves, were holding up their suppliant arms to the town-walls.

The oldest soldiers were amazed at the regularity of the enemy's march. The troops were skilfully grouped ; the infantry executed, with great precision, movements which they had hitherto been ignorant of, and it was an extraordinary thing to see the Aucas form a parallel round the town, and almost instantaneously throw up earthworks which protected them from the artillery.

" *Sangre de Dios !*" the colonel exclaimed, " there is a white man among the villains ; never before have they waged war in this way."

" Hum !" the major muttered, biting his moustache, " if the president does not send succour we are lost."

" Yes, my friend : we shall leave our skins here."

" How many are there, colonel ? twenty thousand—thirty thousand ?"

"And those who are still coming up, and who blacken the distant plains?—Hulloh! but what means the sound of that bugle?"

Four chiefs, preceded by a herald who carried a white flag, had halted within half gun-shot of the first barriers of Poblacion de Sur.

"They seem," the colonel said, "to be desiring a parley. Do they fancyme fool enough to venture into thattrap? Major, just fire a round of canister into that group to teach them not to treat us as fools."

"We should be wrong, colonel; let us learn what they want."

"But where shall we find a man fool enough to risk his carcase among those pagans, who have neither faith nor law?"

"I will go, with your permission," the major said, simply.

"You?" Don Antonio exclaimed, in amazement.

"Yes, I. Unfortunate persons have been confided to our guard and our honour. I am but a man; my life is of but little consequence for the defence of the town. I am old, colonel, and will try to save the inhabitants of Carmen."

The governor suppressed a sigh, and affectionately shook his old friend's hand.

"Go," he said, with considerable emotion, "and may Heaven protect you!"

"Thanks," Major Bloomfield answered.

CHAPTER XV.

A BRAVE RESOLVE.

ON leaving Carmen Pedrito felt a recollection of his sister aroused in his mind, and in order to warn Don Valentine Cardoso of the invasion of the Indians, he started at a gallop for the estancia, which, thanks to the speed of the fresh horse the governor had given him, he reached without a check. All was quiet at San Julian, and the sentry watching in the mirador had perceived nothing alarming in the distance.

Patito, in the capataz's absence, was on guard at the battery, like a faithful watch-dog.

"Where is Don Blas?" the bombero asked.

"At Carmen, with Don Sylvio d'Arenal," the gaucho answered.

"What! have they not returned yet?"

"No."

"Lead me to Don Valentine."

The estanciero heartily welcomed the bombero, and sent for his sister, who arrived with Dona Concha.

"What brings you here in such a hurry, Pedrito?"

"A very serious matter, Don Valentine," he answered, after embracing Mercedes several times; "but only look, excellency, how pretty she is in her new dress! Kiss me again, little sister."

"Have you only come to devour the girl with caresses?" Don Valentine asked, with a smile; "if so, go on to your heart's content."

"That is almost enough," Pedrito replied, his eyes filled with tears. "Alas! our family is diminishing daily. Still," he added, changing his accent, "however great the love I bear my sister, it is not for her sake alone that I am here. But stay, excellency, that is not true; it is for her sake, her sake alone, though apparently for yours, I have just come from Carmen."

From Carmen?" said Dona Concha, involuntarily.

"Yes, senorita," the bombero answered, as if reading the young lady's secret thoughts, "and I saw Don Sylvio d'Arenal there."

Dona Concha turned red as a cherry, and was silent.

"And what have you been doing in Carmen?" Don Valentine asked.

"I went to warn his excellency Colonel Don Antonio Valverde that the Indians have entered the country of the Republic, plundering and burning everything on their road."

"An invasion!" Don Valentine said, with an internal tremor.

"O Heavens!" the two girls exclaimed, clasping their hands with a movement of terror.

"Yes, excellency, an inconceivable and terrible invasion. When I had warned the governor, I remembered my sister, and came here."

"You are a worthy fellow, Pedrito," the estanciero said, as he offered him his hand. "You are more than a brother to Mercedes. But do not be frightened! the estancia is safer than Carmen."

"I saw that so soon as I arrived, excellency, and that removed a heavy weight which oppressed my heart. I shall now go, with almost gladness, to join my two brothers. Juan died on the field—the same fate awaits us. But Mercedes is happy, and I can die in peace."

"Oh, my kind Pedrito," Mercedes exclaimed, as she burst into tears, and threw herself into his arms; "must you not live for one who loves you?"

"Come, do not cry, little girl, but say good-bye; I must return to the plain."

He tenderly embraced his sister, who was still weeping, left the room, mounted his horse again, and started at a gallop.

"Father," Dona Concha said, eagerly, "are we going to remain at the estancia during the invasion of the Indians?"

"My child, it is the safest plan."

"But, Don Sylvio?" she added, with a delicious pout.

"He will come and join us."

"Oh, no," she said, hurriedly. "You forget, father, that the roads are impracticable, and infested with Indians; I do not wish him to fall into an ambushade of the pagans."

"What is to be done?"

"Send him a messenger ordering him, from me, to remain at Carmen, or, if he absolutely insists on returning, to take a boat; the Indians will not dare attack him on the river. Write to him, father; I will add a few lines to your letter, and he will not like to displease his wife."

"His wife?" her father repeated, with a smile.

"Or nearly so, as I am going to marry him in two days. You will write at once, will you not, dear father?"

"I have no will but your caprices," he added with an air of resignation.

He sat down at a mahogany desk and wrote; Concha, leaning smilingly over his chair, read over his shoulder. So soon as Don Valentine had concluded, he turned to his beloved daughter.

"Well, are you satisfied, little Mrs. Bluebeard?" he asked her.

"Oh, my kind father," she replied, taking his head in both her hands, and kissing him on the forehead. Then, with a movement full of loving grace, she took the pen from her father's fingers, and was writing a few lines at the foot of the letter when a great noise, mingled with shrieks, was heard outside.

"O Heavens!" she exclaimed, as if struck to the heart, and turning deadly pale.

She rushed to the steps, and perceived Patito and Pedrito carrying a man wrapped up in a cloak; other persons were collected round Dona Sallazar, who seemed on the point of fainting.

"Whose is that body?" Dona Concha asked in a sharp, imperative voice.

"It is my son's!" the heart-broken mother cried.

"Don Blas Sallazar," Pedrito answered.

"And Don Sylvio?" the maiden continued.

"Has disappeared," Pedrito said.

She fell back, half dead; her father caught her in his arms and carried her back to the drawing-room.

This is what had happened. Pedrito, when he had got a short distance from the estancia, was all but unsaddled, by his horse suddenly shying. Aroused from his reverie by the animal's terror, the horseman looked around to discover the cause of it. Judge of his surprise! At a spot which appeared to have been the scene of a desperate struggle the damp earth retained the marks of several horses' hoofs; weapons had been thrown away there, and seven corpses lay pell-mell in pools of blood and muddy water.

"What!" Pedrito thought, "have the Indians come this way already?" and he added, "Why is it they have not stripped their victims?"

He dismounted and walked up to the bodies which he examined attentively and felt and raised one after the other.

"Something that is not natural has taken place here," the bombero said; "two peons! Oh!" he said, on coming to the gauchos, "what are these men wearing masks? Oh! oh! has it been a crime instead of an ambushade, and a bit of Spanish vengeance instead of an Indian attack? I will have a look at them."

He tore from the faces of the four gauchos the strips of wool they had employed to conceal themselves.

"On my word, I do not know them; who can these scoundrels be?"

At the same moment his eyes rested on another corpse, hidden by a thickly growing bush, beneath which it lay stretched out.

"This man is not dressed in the same manner, so he must be one of the caballeros attacked by these villains; I will have a look at him, and perhaps he will give me the clue to this adventure."

He uttered a cry on recognising Don Blas Sallazar, the capataz of the estancia de San Julian. He bent over him, raised him softly in his arms, and deposited him gently in the road, with his back leaning against a rock.

"Poor capataz! so brave and kind! but if I am not mistaken I can feel a little warmth. *Viva Dios!* I should be glad if he were not dead."

The bombero then opened his clothes, and saw three insignificant wounds on his chest; he hastened to bandage them carefully, and found that the flesh was scarcely cut. Pedrito rubbed his hands with a satisfied air, until he discovered on the skull a fourth wound, on which the hair had clotted and stopped the flow of blood. He washed the wound, cut away the hair round it with his knife, saturated a handkerchief with water, and bound it tightly over the wound. The capataz gave a faint sigh, and moved slightly.

"Carai!" Pedro exclaimed, in delight, "he is saved; wounds on the skull, when they do not kill at once, are cured in a week."

By degrees the wounded man seemed to return to life, and at length opened his eyes and gazed absently round.

"Ah, my good fellow, do you feel better? *Carai*, do you know that you have had a narrow escape?"

The capataz gave a gentle nod.

"Wait a minute," Pedrito continued; and he thrust into his mouth the neck of the boto of aguardiente, which the bomberos always carry on their saddle-bow. Don Blas made a grimace, but soon resigning himself, he drank the liquor his physician forced down his throat; in a few minutes his eyes sparkled with their accustomed brilliancy, and a slight flush tinged his cheeks.

"Thanks," he said, thrusting away the bota with his hand.

"You speak, therefore you are alive, capataz. Can you talk?"

"Yes."

"Without danger to yourself, senor?"

"Yes."

"In the first place, do you recognise me?"

"You are Pedrito, the bombero," the wounded man said, with a smile.

"I am a friend."

"Yes."

"Who put you in this charming condition?"

"I do not know."

"Hum! how many were they?"

"I am ignorant."

"Eh! and why did they serve you out in this way?"

"I do not know."

"I do not know; I am ignorant; all that is not very clear; and if you never say any more, I doubt whether the assassins will be detected. Where have you come from? from Carmen?"

"We left Carmen this morning, to——"

"One moment, if you please. You said *we*, I think?"

"Yes, we."

"Who are we?"

"Don Sylvio d'Arenal, myself and two peons."

"Good. Where did you separate from Don Sylvio?"

"I did not leave Don Sylvio at all."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"We were together, when these bandits suddenly came out of this wood, and attacked us. Our peons were killed at the first shot, but Don Sylvio and I got our backs against a tree behind our horses; I fought—and I can tell you no more."

"This blow on the head settled you; it was enough to fell an ox; but you have a hard head, and lucky for you, for you will recover. So you were unable to recognise your assassins?"

"Yes."

"Just come and have a look at them with me."

And Don Blas Sallazar got up, and tottered a few steps with extreme difficulty.

"Take my arm," Pedrito said.

The capataz, supported by the bombero, examined the faces of the gauchos.

"I recognise this man," he said, pointing to a corpse; "it is Corrocho. Now I know the originator of the snare."

"Yes; but Don Sylvio's body is not here."

"Heaven be praised!" the capataz exclaimed; "he must have escaped, and we shall find him at the estancia."

"No!" Pedrito said.

"What do you mean by no?"

"I have just come from there, and should have seen him."

"Where is he?"

"That's the very point, I may say, like you, I do not know."

"Don Pedrito, let us go to San Julian."

"I will carry you, then, at a walking pace; your head has not closed again yet."

"No matter; I must go there with the speed of the wind."

"Then you want to kill yourself?"

"I do not care. I think you love Don Valentine Cardoso and his daughter."

"I would lay down my life for them."

"The happiness, perhaps the life, of Dona Concha is at stake; mine is of no consequence."

"That is true," the bombero said.

"Then you consent?"

"I do."

"Thank you! one word more. If I die on the road, you will tell Dona Concha that the assassin——"

"That the assassin——" Pedrito repeated, finding the other hesitate.

"But, no," the capataz continued, "it is unnecessary. God will not permit me to die before I have seen her."

"As you please. Let us be off."

He remounted, placed the capataz before him, and flew along with the velocity of the phantom-horse in the German ballad.

The horse, when it reached the gates of the estancia, slipped, and fell dead. But the bombero, who had foreseen this accident, came down on his feet, holding in his arms his friend.

Patito helped the bombero to carry poor Don Blas as far as the house.

Dona Concha, who had regained her senses, insisted, in spite of her father's entreaties, on remaining by the side of the wounded man. She lavished attentions on him, poured into his mouth a few drops of a powerful cordial, and awaited his return to life.

"Forgive me, senorita, forgive me," he said, as soon as he opened his eyes again and perceived her, "I could not save him; my strength deserted me."

"I have nothing to forgive you, Don Blas," the young lady answered, who had learnt the facts from Pedrito; "on the contrary, my friend, I thank you for your devotion. One word, however, when you fell was Don Sylvio still fighting by your side?"

"Yes, senorita."

"Then it was only after your fall that he succumbed to the numbers?"

"No; Don Sylvio is not dead."

"What makes you suppose that?"

"A very simple thing: had he been killed, his body would have been found lying by my side. What interest could the assassins have in concealing a corpse, when they left seven lying in the middle of the road? If they wished to hide their crimes, a hole is soon dug in the sand."

"That is true," Dona Concha said, "he still lives; but do you know the author of the crime?"

"Yes, senorita."

"And——"

The capataz looked at the persons who crowded the room. Dona Concha understood him, and dismissed them. Pedrito was about to follow with the rest.

"Remain," she said to him, "you can speak before Don Pedrito, his sister, and my father. Who is the man that attacked you?"

"Permit me, senorita, I do not positively say that he was among the assassins, for I did not see him; but it is certainly he who let the cowards loose upon us, and directed them from a distance."

"Yes, Don Blas; he was the head, and these ten or twelve bandits were only the arms."

"The very thing. Among the dead I found the corpse of one of his confidants, the gaucho Corrocho, whom I surprised the other day conspiring with him against you."

A bitter smile for a moment curled the young lady's blanched lips.

"Will you tell me his name or no?" she exclaimed, stamping her foot passionately.

"Don Torribio Carvajal!"

"I knew it!" she said, with an accent of superb disdain. "Oh, Don Torribio, Don Torribio! where is the man to be found at this hour; where is he? Oh, I would give my fortune, my life, to be face to face with him. Is it in order to assassinate his rivals with impunity that this mysterious man——"

She could not complete the sentence; she burst into tears, and fell into Don Valentine's arms, exclaiming with broken sobs—

"Father, father! who will avenge me?"

"Senorita," said Pedrito, "the man you refer to is difficult to reach."

"Do you know him, Don Pedrito?" she asked, with a start.

"Yes, senorita," he replied. "But do you know who he is?"

"He is said to be a rich Spaniard."

"It is a mistake."

"Have you penetrated the mystery that surrounds him?"

"Yes."

All drew close to Pedrito.

"Well, Don Pedrito?"

"The name of the man you call Don Torribio Carvajal is really Nocobotha, and he is one of the principal chiefs of the Aucas Indians."

"An Indian!" the young lady exclaimed, in stupor.

"Yes; but one of those white-skinned Indians who are descended from the Incas, and call themselves children of the sun."

"Take care, Conchita," Mercedes said, "Nocobotha is a terrible man."

"Then, all that is left me is to die," said the poor affianced girl, as she fell into a chair.

Mercedes regarded her for a moment with a blended look of sorrow, compassion, and tenderness, then walked up to her and gently laid her hand on her shoulder. At this unexpected touch, Dona Concha started and turned round.

"What do you want of me, poor child?" she asked, sadly.

"To save Don Sylvio, if he is alive," Mercedes answered, in a calm, firm voice.

"You?"

"Yes, I! When I was shelterless, did you not open to me your home and your heart? You are suffering, and, in my turn, I have come to say, 'Here I am.'"

"But what can you do, my friend?"

"That is my secret. I know the Indians and the way of behaving with them, and speak their language. The only condition I make is that you promise not to leave the estancia for three days, and not make any attempt to discover what has become of your betrothed."

Dona Concha gazed at Mercedes, whose eye sparkled with a clear and bright fire, her features breathed a species of masculine grace, and so

soft and calm a smile played round her rosy lips that Conchita felt herself subjugated, and, in spite of herself, hope re-entered her heart.

"I swear it to you," she said, as she embraced the girl warmly.

"Thanks," Mercedes replied. "Good-bye, Conchita! in three days you will have news of your betrothed or I shall be dead."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE INVASION.

LET US now give some explanations about the Indian expedition, and the preparations and arrangements made by Nocobotha, at the moment of attempting the siege of Carmen.

"If you succeed in this affair," Don Torribio had said to the two gauchos, after giving them orders to carry off Don Sylvio d'Arenal, "you will receive fifty ounces more. But forget nothing, and be careful."

Panchito and Corrocho, when left alone, shared the ounces between them with transports of joy.

Don Torribio remounted his horse, and proceeded to Carmen, where he spent several days in his house, though no one was aware of the fact. During his stay he had two interviews, under different disguises with Pincheira, at the Pulperia del Sur, the usual meeting-place of the gauchos. Each night three or four mules, laden with bales, left the city, under the escort of Indians, and proceeded in the direction of the Andes.

At length, one night, after a long conference with Pincheira, Don Torribio left El Carmen in his turn, his presence in the town not even being suspected. At six leagues from Carmen he found Panchito and Corrocho, whom he sharply upbraided for their sloth in executing his orders, and he recommended them to act as promptly as possible.

On the morrow, the day of the nandus hunt, Corrocho presented himself at the gate of the estancia, which Patito had refused to open.

On leaving the two bandits, Don Torribio proceeded to the natural grotto, where he changed his clothes once before. There he put on his Indian trappings, and following the banks of the Rio Negro, galloped towards the island of Ghole-Isechel, where he had appointed to meet all the war detachments of the combined Patagonian and Araucano tribes.

The night was one of the most delicious ever enjoyed in America. The fresh air, odorous with the penetrating perfumes of the flowers that

grew in masses on the river-banks, disposed the mind to reverie. The sky, of a dark black hue, was embroidered with stars, in the midst of which sparkled the dazzling Southern Cross, which the Indians call *Paron-Chayke*. The moon poured its soft light on the sand, and played on the foliage of the trees and designed fantastic forms on the sand-banks. The wind blew softly through the branches, in which the blue jay at intervals uttered the melodious notes of its plaintive song. Here and there, in the distance, could be heard the hoarse roar of the cougars, the sharp whine of the panther, and the snapping bark of the red wolf.

Nocobotha, intoxicated by the lovely autumn night, presently checked his horse's speed, and allowed his thoughts to wander. The descendant of Mancho-Capai and Mancho-Oello, the first Incas of Peru, saw pass and repass before his mind the splendours of his race, which had been extinct since the death of Athahualpa, the last Peruvian emperor, whom Pizzaro's soldiers assassinated. His heart swelled with pride and joy when he thought that he was about to reconstitute the empire of his ancestors. The soil he trod was his; the air he breathed was the air of his country!

He went on thus for a long time, travelling in the land of dreams. The stars began to grow pale in the sky; the dawn was already tracing a white line, which gradually became tinged with yellow and red streaks, and, at the approach of day, the breeze freshened. Nocobotha, suddenly roused by the icy dew of the pampas, threw his cloak across his shoulder, with a shudder, and started again at a gallop, after looking up to Heaven, and muttering—

“ Either death or a life of liberty ! ”

A sublime remark in the mouth of this man ! Young, rich, and handsome, he might have remained in Paris, where he had studied, lived there like a nobleman, and enjoyed abundantly all the pleasures of this world. But, no ! Free from all ambitious thoughts, and without calculating on human gratitude, he resolved to deliver his country.

At about eight in the morning, Nocobotha halted before a village, facing the island of Ghole-Isechel. At this spot the Rio Negro attains its greatest width, and each of the arms formed by the island is about two miles and a-half across. The island, that rises in the middle of the water, four leagues long and two wide, is one vast bouquet, whence the most delicious fragrance is exhaled, and in which innumerable birds sing. Illumined this day by the beams of a splendid sun, the island seemed to have been laid on the river like a basket of flowers, for the pleasure of the eyes and the delight of the fancy.

As far as the eye reached along the banks of the river, thousands of toldos and chocas could be seen erected close together, and their strange colours flashing in the sun. Numerous canoes, made of horse-hides sewn together, and generally round, or hollowed out of the trunks of trees, crossed the river in every direction.

Nocobotha entrusted his horse to an Indian woman, and walked among the toldos. In front of their openings the ostrich-plumed pennons of the chiefs floated in the breeze.

He was recognised so soon as he arrived. The warriors drew up in line as he passed, or bowed respectfully before him. The veneration the southern nations have ever felt for the descendants of the Incas seemed changed into a species of adoration. The bejewelled coronet that adorned his brow appeared to arouse the most lively joy in all hearts.

When he reached the river-bank, a fishing-canoe conveyed him across to the island, where a toldo had been prepared for him. Lucaney, warned by the sentries who watched for his arrival, presented himself before Nocobotha the moment he landed.

"The great chief," he said, with a bow, "has returned among his sons. Has my father had a pleasant journey?"

"I have had a pleasant journey, I thank my brother."

"If my father permits, I will conduct him to his toldo."

"Go on," the chief said.

Lucaney bowed a second time, and guided the great chief along a track formed through the bushes. They soon reached a toldo of brilliant colours, large and clean, the handsomest on the island, in a word.

"My father is at home," Lucaney said, lifting the poncho that covered the opening.

Nocobotha went in.

"My brother will follow me," he said.

The woollen curtain fell again behind the two ulmens.

This abode, like the others, contained a fire, by the side of which Nocobotha and Lucaney seated themselves. They smoked in silence for some moments, when the great chief addressed Lucaney.

"Have the ulmens, apo-ulmens and caraskens of all the nations and tribes assembled on the island of Ghole-Isechel as I gave orders?"

"They are assembled," Lucaney answered.

"When will they come to my toldo?"

"The chiefs are awaiting my father's good pleasure."

"Time is precious. Before twilight we must have ridden twenty leagues. Lucaney will warn the chiefs."

The chief rose without replying and went out.

"Come!" Nocobotha said, so soon as he was alone, "the die is cast. I am in Cæsar's position, but, by heavens, like him, I will cross the Rubicon."

He rose and walked for more than an hour up and down the toldo, immersed in deep thought. A noise of footsteps was heard; the curtain was raised, and Lucaney appeared.

"Well?" Nocobotha asked him.

"The chiefs are here."

"Let them come in."

The ulmens, sixty at least, dressed in their richest clothes, and painted and armed for war, passed silently one after the other in front of the great chief, saluted him, kissed the hem of his robe, and ranged themselves round the fire. A troop of warriors, outside, kept listeners aloof.

Nocobotha, in spite of his self-command, could not restrain a movement of pride.

"My brothers are welcome," he said; "I was impatiently expecting them. Lucaney, how many warriors have you assembled?"

"Two thousand five hundred."

"Chamata?"

"Three thousand."

"Metipan?"

"Two thousand."

"Vera?"

"Three thousand seven hundred."

"Killipan?"

"One thousand nine hundred."

Nocobotha wrote down on his tablets the numbers stated by the ulmens, who, after answering, arranged themselves on his right hand.

"Lucaney," he continued, "is Pincheira's war-party here?"

"Yes, father."

"How many warriors has he?"

"Four thousand eight hundred."

"Mulato, how many have you?"

"Four thousand."

"Guaykilof?"

"Three thousand five hundred."

"Killamel?"

"Six thousand two hundred."

"Churlakin?"

"Five thousand six hundred."

"Which are the nations that accepted the quipus, and sent their warriors to the gathering place?"

"All!" Churlakin answered, proudly.

"My heart is satisfied with the wisdom of my son. What is the effective strength of these eight nations?"

"Twenty-nine thousand seven hundred and sixty men, commanded by the bravest ulmens."

"Good," said Nocobotha. "The Aucas and Araucano chiefs here present have brought twenty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty warriors. We can also reckon on a reinforcement of five hundred and fifty gauchos, or white deserters, whose assistance will be very useful to us. The total strength of the army is ninety-four thousand nine hundred and fifty men, with whom, if my brothers place confidence in me, we shall expel the Spaniards, and regain our territory within three months."

"Our father will command, and we obey."

"Never has a larger and more powerful army menaced the Spanish authority since Tahí Mari's attempt upon Chili. The whites are ignorant of our projects, as I convinced myself at Carmen. Hence our sudden invasion will be to them a thunderbolt, and render them motionless with terror. On our approach they will be already half conquered. Lucaney, have you given out the arms I sent you from Carmen to the warriors who understand their use?"

"A corps of three thousand two hundred men is armed with muskets and bayonets, and abundantly provided with powder and ball."

"It is well. Lucaney, Churlakin, and Metipan will remain with me, and aid me in communicating with the other chiefs. And now, ulmens and caraskens of the united nations, listen to my orders, and engrave them deeply on your minds, for any disobedience or cowardice will immediately be punished by death."

There was a solemn silence. Nocobotha took a calm and haughty look round the assembly.

"In an hour," he continued, "the army will start in close columns. A cavalry corps will protect each infantry detachment. The army will extend along a line of twenty leagues, which will be concentrated on Carmen. All the chiefs will fire the country as they pass, in order that the smoke, impelled by the wind, may hide our movements and cover us like a thick curtain. The crops, estancias, and all property belonging to the whites, will be burned and levelled with the ground. The cattle will be sent to the rear-guard to swell our booty. Show no mercy to the bomberos, but kill them on the spot. Killipan, with twelve thousand horsemen and ten thousand infantry, will command the rear-guard, to which will be attached all the women of any age to fight, and it will set out six hours after the main body. Bear in mind that the warriors must advance in compact bodies, and not as stragglers. Be off, and make haste, for we must be in front of Carmen by daybreak to-morrow."

The chiefs bowed, and silently defiled out of the toldo.

A few minutes later an extraordinary animation prevailed in the immense camp of the Indians. The women pulled down the toldos and loaded the mules; the warriors assembled to the sound of musical instruments; the children lassoed and saddled the horses; in short, hurried preparations were made for a start.

Gradually the disorder ceased. The ranks were formed, and several detachments started in different directions. Nocobotha, standing on the top of a mound, and accompanied by his three aides-de-camp, Lucaney, Churlakin, and Metipan, followed with a glass the movements of the army, which, within a quarter of an hour, was no longer visible. Already the plain was on fire, and veiled the horizon with a black smoke.

Nocobotha descended the hill and went to the river-bank, where the four ulmens got into a canoe, which they themselves rowed. They soon reached land, where twenty-five Aucas horsemen were waiting for them. The party set out on the trail of the army—a too visible trail. Alas! the country so green and beautiful that very morning was gloomy, desolated, and covered with ashes and ruins.

From a distance Pedrito and his brothers perceived the Indians, and although surrounded by a swarm of warriors, they succeeded, through their courage, in escaping from their enemies, with the exception of poor Juan, who was killed by an Indian lance. Pepe and Lopez, both wounded, went on in front to watch the movements of the invaders, while Pedrito, covered with dust and blood, galloped to give the alarm at Carmen.

This escape singularly annoyed Nocobotha and disarranged his combinations. Nevertheless, the army continued its march, and at night-fall the town could be seen through the growing obscurity. At the head of a hundred picked warriors, Nocobotha made a circuit and advanced on Poblacion del Sur. All was silent, and the barricades seemed abandoned. The Indians succeeded in scaling them, and would have carried the town, had it not been for the vigilance of Major Bloomfield.

The great chief, not wishing to shake the confidence of his men by vain attempts, fell back and ordered a camp to be formed in front of the town. Pursuing tactics hitherto strange to the Indians, he made a parallel and ordered a wide ditch to be dug in the sand, the earth from which served to throw up a breastwork that defended them from the cannon.

Pincheira, as we know, was in Carmen for the purpose of arranging a revolt among the gauchos. As Nocobotha desired to come to an understanding with him as to the decisive attack, he sent towards the town a Chilian deserter, who knew how to play the bugle, an instrument quite unused among the Aucas. This bugler bore a white flag, in sign of peace, and asked for a parley. He was followed by Churlakin, Lucaney, Metipan, and Chaukata, who were ordered by the great chief to make proposals to the governor of Carmen.

The four ambassadors, standing within half gun-shot from the town, with their long lances planted before them, with the ostrich plume, the symbol of their dignity, flying out, were waiting motionless on their horses. Their leather armour was covered with coats of mail made of small rings, which had doubtless belonged to the soldiers of Almagro or Valdivia. The bugler, haughtily standing a few paces in front of them, waved his flag. The chiefs' steeds were armed with rich harness, embroidered with silver plates that spark'd in the sun's beams.

The Spanish pride suffered at the thought of treating on equal terms with these pagans, to whom they even refused a soul, and whom they did not recognise as men. But it was necessary to gain time; perhaps the reinforcements from Buenos Ayres were already under weigh.

The Indian bugler, wearied at receiving no answer to his two first summons, blew a third peal by Churlakin's order. A Spanish bugler at length replied from the interior of the town, and the barrier was opened, leaving a passage for a soldier, who carried a white flag, and was followed by an officer on horseback. This officer, it will be remembered, was Major Bloomfield, who, as an old soldier, was unwilling to appear before the Indians except in full dress uniform.

He proceeded without hesitation towards the ulmens, who, through their silver ornaments and their immobility, resembled at a distance equestrian statues.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ATTACK ON POBLACION DEL SUR.

MAJOR BLOOMFIELD, who had made up his mind to lose his life, had no weapons, not even a sword. He halted within hearing distance, and as he spoke decently the Aucas language, which he had learnt in previous campaigns, he had no need of an interpreter.

"What do you want, chiefs?" he asked, in a loud, firm voice, with a ceremonious bow.

"Are you the man whom the whites call Don Antonio Valverde, and to whom they give the title of governor?" Churlakin asked, in his turn.

"No; our laws prohibit a governor leaving his post; but I am second in command, and he has sent me to you,"

The Indians seemed to consult for a moment; then, leaving their long lances planted in the ground, they advanced towards the old officer, who did not evince the slightest surprise at this movement. Churlakin spoke in the name of all.

"My brother is brave," he said, astonished at the major's coolness.

"At my age," the old man replied, "death is a favour."

"My father bears on his brow the snow of many winters; he must be one of the wisest chiefs of his nation, and the young men round the council-fire listen to him respectfully."

"Say no more about me," the major said; "why have you asked for this interview?"

"Will not my father conduct us to the council-fire of his nation?" Churlakin said, in an insinuating tone. "Is it honourable for great warriors, formidable chiefs, thus to discuss serious affairs on horseback, between two armies?"

"No chief of the enemy can enter an invested town."

"Does my father fear that our force may take his city?" Churlakin continued, with a laugh, though vexed in the highest degree at losing the hope of coming to an understanding with Pincheira.

"I am not accustomed to fear; I only tell you a rule you are ignorant of, that is all. If this pretext is sufficient to break off the interview, you are at liberty to do so, and I will withdraw."

"Oh, oh! my father is quick for his age. Tell me what brings you here."

The ulmens exchanged a glance, and a few whispered words. At length Churlakin continued—

"Has my father seen the great army of the Aucas?" he said.

"Yes," the major replied, carelessly.

"And has my father, who is a white man, and has great learning, counted the warriors?"

"Yes."

"Ah! and how many are they, according to his calculation."

"Their number is but of slight consequence to us."

"Still," the Indian pressed, "does my father know how many they may be?"

"Two hundred thousand at the most."

The chiefs were struck by the negligent way in which the major doubled the strength of their army.

"My father," Churlakin continued, "is not terrified at the number of these warriors, who obey a single chief?"

"Why should I be so?" the major said, whose attention the surprise of the ulmens had not escaped; "has not my nation vanquished more numerous armies? But we are losing our time in useless words, chief."

"My father must have patience."

"Finish your Indian circumlocutions then."

"The army of the great nations is encamped in front of Carmen, in order to obtain satisfaction for all the wrongs the pale-faces have made us endure since their invasion of America."

"Explain yourself clearly. Why do you invade our frontiers? Have we failed in our engagements? Of what do you complain?"

"My father pretends to be ignorant of the just motives for war we have against the whites. His nation has made a treaty with the white men who dwell on the other side of the mountains, and who are our enemies; hence his nation has no friendship for us."

"Chief, this quarrel is ridiculous. Confess that you desire to plunder our farms, steal our cattle and horses, and I can understand you; but if we were at war with Chili, you would act in the same way. The jest has lasted too long; let us come to facts. What do you want?"

"My father is clever," Churlakin said, with a laugh. "Listen! this is what the chiefs say—'The ancient chief, against our rights and his own, sold to my fathers' ancestors a land which did not belong to him, without the consent of the other ulmens of the country.'"

"What next?" said the major.

"The chiefs assembled round the tree of Gualichu have resolved to give back to the great white chief all the objects from the first to the last formerly given to the ulmen, and take back the country."

"Is that all?"

"All."

"How long do the chiefs give the Governor of Carmen to discuss these propositions?"

"From sunrise to sunset."

"Very good," the old officer said, ironically; "and supposing that the governor refuses?"

"The colony of the white men will be destroyed by fire, their warriors massacred, and their wives and children carried off into slavery."

"I will transmit your demands to the governor, and to-morrow at sunset you will have his answer."

"Keep on your guard meantime."

"Thanks, chief; I am delighted to meet an Indian who is not a scoundrel. Good-bye till to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" the chief repeated, courteously.

The major withdrew slowly to the barricades, where the colonel, alarmed by the long interview, had made all preparations to avenge the death of his old friend.

"Well?" he said, as he pressed his hand.

"They are trying to gain time," the major answered, "in order to play us one of their demon's tricks."

"What do they demand, though?"

"Impossibilities, colonel, and they are well aware of it, for they appeared to be laughing at us, when they submitted their absurd demands to me. The chief, they say, had no right to sell his territory, which they also say we must return to them in twenty-four hours, and then came the bed-roll of their usual threats. Ah! that is not all; they are ready to repay us all they received for the sale of his lands."

"Why," Don Antonio interrupted, in a tone of the utmost scorn, "the fellows must be mad."

"No, colonel, they are robbers."

At this moment tremendous shouts were heard at the barriers, and the two officers, suddenly interrupting their conversation, hurried up in all haste.

Four or five thousand horses, apparently free, but whose invisible riders were concealed, according to the Indian fashion, along their flanks, were coming at a frightful pace against the barricades. Two rounds of canister produced disorder in their ranks, without checking their speed, and they fell like lightning on the defenders of Poblacion del Sur. Then began one of those terrible fights of the Indian frontiers, a cruel and indescribable contest, in which no prisoners were made; the *bolas perdidas*, the *laquis*, the bayonet, and the lance, were their sole weapons. The Indians were immediately reinforced, but the Spaniards did not give way an inch. This desperate struggle lasted for about two hours; the Indians seemed to give ground, and the whites redoubled their efforts to drive them back to their camp, when suddenly the cry was heard behind them—

"Treachery! treachery!"

The major and the colonel, who were fighting in the front rank of the soldiers and volunteers, turned round; they were caught between two fires.

Pincheira, dressed in the uniform of a Chilian officer, was prancing at the head of a hundred gauchos, more or less intoxicated, who followed him, yelling—

"Pillage! pillage!"

The two veteran officers exchanged a long, sad glance, and their determination was formed in a second.

The colonel hurled among the Indians a barrel of gunpowder, with a

lighted fuze, which swept them off as the wind sweeps the dust, and put them to flight. The Argentines, at the major's command, wheeled round and charged the gauchos commanded by Pincheira. These bandits, with their sabres and bolas in their hands, dashed at the Argentines, who slipped into the open doors of the abandoned house, in a narrow street, where the gauchos could not manœuvre their horses. The Argentines, who were skilful marksmen, did not throw away a shot; they fell back on the river-bank, and kept up a well-sustained fire on the gauchos, who had turned back, and on the Aucas, who had again escaladed the barricades, while the guns of the fort scattered canister and death among them.

The white men then crossed the river without any risk, and their enemies installed themselves in the Poblacion del Sur, filling the air with triumphant hurrahs.

The colonel ordered considerable works to be thrown up on the river bank, and placed in them two batteries of six guns each, whose fire crossed.

Through the treachery of the gauchos the Indians had seized Poblacion del Sur, which, however, was not the key of the place; but this negative success entailed an enormous loss upon them. The colonists, through this, saw their communications interrupted with the estancias on the opposite bank, but luckily the farmers had come into Upper Carmen beforehand with their horses and cattle, and the boats were all moored under the batteries of the fort which protected them. The suburb captured by the assailants was, consequently, entirely empty.

On one side the whites congratulated themselves at having no longer to defend a dangerous and useless post; on the other, the Aucas asked themselves of what good this dearly-acquired suburb would prove to them.

Three gauchos during the fight were dragged from their horses and made prisoners. One was Panchito, the second name unknown, and the third a man of the name of Diego. A council of war, assembled in the open air, sentenced them to the gallows.

"Well, Diego," asked Panchito, "where is Pincheira?"

"The scoundrel has escaped," Panchito replied; "deserter from the army, deserter from the gallows; that is the way in which he breaks all his engagements. He will come to a very bad end."

"Our affair seems clear enough," Diego said, with a sigh.

"Nonsense! a little sooner or a little later, what's the odds?"

"The gallows seems to tickle your fancy, Panchito."

"Not exactly," the other answered; "but for four generations my family have been hanged, from father to son; we quite expect it. What will the fiend do with my soul?"

"I do not know."

"Nor do I."

During this edifying conversation three lofty gallows had been erected a little outside the entrenchments on the river-bank, in the sight of the whole population and of the gauchos, who, grouped in the Poblacion del Sur, yelled with rage. Panchito and Diego and their friend were hun-

as a warning example; a *bando*, affixed at the foot of the ladder, threatened every insurgent gaucho with the same fate.

While this was going on night set in, illumined by the burning faubourg conquered by the Indians. The flames tinged the hapless town with fantastic gleams, and the inhabitants, plunged in a gloomy stupor, said to themselves that the flames would soon cross the road and reduce Carmen to ashes. The governor seemed made of iron; he did not take a moment's rest, he visited the forts, heightened drooping spirits, and tried to imbue all with hopes which were far from his heart. As for the Indians, they made two attempts to surprise the town, and, just before dawn, retired to their camp.

"Major," the colonel said, "it is not possible to deceive ourselves. To-morrow, the day after, or in a week, all will be over with us."

"Hum! at the last moment we will blow up the fort."

"We are deprived of even that resource."

"Why so?"

"Old soldiers, such as we are, cannot thus dispose of the lives of others."

"You are right," the major continued, precisely; "we will blow out our brains."

"Nor can we do that either, my friend; for we must be the last on the breach."

"But," the major said, after a short silence, for the undeniable reasoning of his superior had crushed him, "how is it that we have received no news from head-quarters?"

"They have something else to do there than think about us."

"Oh! I cannot believe that."

A peon announced Don Torribio Carvajal.

Don Torribio came in dressed in the splendid uniform of a colonel in the Argentine army, with an aide-de-camp's badge on his left arm. The two officers on his entrance felt an intense tremor. Don Torribio bowed to them.

"Is it really you, Don Torribio?" the governor asked.

"Well, I suppose so," he answered, with a smile.

"And your long journey?"

"I have just arrived."

"And this uniform?"

"Well, gentlemen, as I was tired of being regarded in the colony as a mysterious being, a sorcerer, a vampire, or something of the sort, I resolved to become a man like the rest of you."

"Then you are——"

"An officer, like yourself, colonel, and, in addition, aide-de-camp to the general."

"It is prodigious," Don Antonio remarked.

"Why so? nothing is more simple, on the contrary."

A strange suspicion had entered the major's mind at Don Torribio's unexpected arrival, a suspicion which only disappeared after he made the following remark:

"Yes," he continued, "I am a colonel. In addition, the President of

the Republic has entrusted me with a message, which I feel sure will please you."

And he took from the breast of his uniform a large despatch sealed with the Argentine arms. The colonel, with the permission of the two officers, opened and perused the mission, and unbounded delight was depicted on his face.

"Oh, oh!" he exclaimed, "two hundred and fifty men! I did not expect such a reinforcement."

"The president is very anxious about the colony," Don Torribio said, "and will spare no sacrifice to preserve it."

"Thanks to this succour, Don Torribio, I care no more for the Indians than a wis of straw."

"It seems that the troops will not arrive too soon."

"It was only just in time, canario," the governor replied, imprudently. "Where are your men?"

"They will arrive within an hour."

"What are they?"

"Gauchos."

"Hum!" said the colonel, "I should have preferred any other troops. However, it is of no consequence. With your permission, I will go to meet them."

"I am at your orders."

"Shall I go with you?" the major asked.

"That would be better still," Torribio observed, quickly.

"No, major," said Don Antonio. "Stay here, for who knows what may happen during my absence? Come, Don Torribio."

The latter smiled; and it would have been difficult to say what the smile meant. He went out, accompanied by the colonel, and they mounted their horses. As they left the fort a man passed them, walking at a quick pace.

"Pedrito!" Don Torribio muttered to himself; "providing that he has not recognised me, all is well."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CAVE OF THE COUGARS.

PEDRITO followed his sister without saying a word, and almost as much astonished as Don Valentine and her daughter at Mercedes' devotion. She led him to her bedroom, a charming retreat, full of shade and fresh

air. While the bombero eagerly surveyed all the objects, Mercedes, sighing and ready to weep, took a parting glance at her well-beloved room; but she had the courage to repress her tears.

"Sit down, brother. I have a great service to ask of you."

"Hang it! A service, little sister? why assume so solemn an air for such a simple thing?"

"Because it is difficult."

"Nothing is impossible to please you. What is the matter?"

"Swear to me, first, to grant what I am about to ask of you."

"Go on, child, and do not trouble yourself about the rest," Pedrito said, with a hearty laugh.

"No. I must have your oath."

"I have taken it; that is understood. I have all the gravity of an Indian idol."

"You are laughing at me," she said, with tears in her eyes.

"Confound the women!" Pedrito remarked; "they can always twirl men round their fingers. Come, silly child, do not cry any more. I swear to obey your whims. Tell me what it is all about."

"I have promised Dona Concha, my dear brother, to give her within three days news about Don Sylvio."

"What next?"

"I wish to perform my promise."

"The deuce!"

"And for that I have counted on you."

"On me?"

"Yes."

"How can I help you?"

"Without you the affair is impracticable."

"In that case, little sister, I am greatly afraid that——"

"Remember your oath."

"Go on. I am listening."

"I have lived a long time among the Indians, whose manners and language I am acquainted with. I intend to get into their camp unnoticed, in order to learn where Don Sylvio is."

"Good-bye, Mercedes."

"And your oath, brother?" she said, placing herself before the door.

"I shall not keep it; and if Heaven thinks that I ought, we will argue the point together."

She looked at her brother for a moment in silence. "You are quite resolved?" she continued.

"Quite."

"Then I shall go alone."

"What!" Pedrito exclaimed, as he rushed towards her; "do you wish to be the death of me, then?"

Mercedes made no reply.

"Go away, brother. I will do without you."

"Come on! I will follow you. Oh, these women!" the bombero exclaimed.

"We shall succeed," she exclaimed, joyfully.

"Yes, in getting ourselves killed."

"Let us be off, brother," she said, placing under her arm a small bundle of clothing.

Mercedes, fearing the emotion of a farewell scene, avoided Dona Concha.

Patito had got two horses in readiness, which speedily carried brother and sister far from the estancia. At the battery the capataz was waiting for them.

"Senorita," he said to Mercedes, "you are a noble girl. Heaven will aid and bless you."

"Don Blas," Mercedes answered, with a smile, as she drew from her bosom a small gold cross Dona Concha had given her, and broke the velvet neck ribbon, "take this cross, and keep it in remembrance of me."

The two travellers had been galloping a long time ere the capataz left off kissing the cross, while thinking that its usual resting-place was on the maiden's bosom. Pedrito and his sister rode side by side without exchanging a word, for both were plunged in deep thought.

"How far have we to go?" Mercedes asked all at once.

"Two leagues."

After a while they heard the footfall of a horse behind them; they turned, and perceived Patito, who was making signals to them, and the gaucho soon joined them.

"My mistress is following me," he said.

Dona Concha, dressed in male clothing, came up at the full speed of her horse.

"Ah," she said, on joining them, "I trembled lest I should miss you."

"Are we to turn back?" Pedrito asked, with a fugitive gleam of hope.

"No, no; on the contrary; push on," Concha replied.

"Where are you going, senorita?"

"I am following you."

"What?" he said, fancying he misunderstood her.

"I guessed your plan, Mercedes, and mean to share its perils."

"That is fine, senorita!" Pedrito exclaimed.

"She is right," Mercedes said, simply; "that will be better."

"You, Patito," Concha said, "can go back; I have no need of your services."

"Forgive me, but with your permission I will remain; I am not wanted at the estancia, and, though I do not know where you are going, two strong arms are worth keeping."

"Remain, my friend."

"But your father, Don Valentine, senorita?" Pedrito attempted to say.

"He approves of what I do," she answered.

They again started: two hours later they reached the foot of a hill, half-way up which was a natural grotto, known in the country by the name of the Cave of the Cougars.

"My brothers are there," Pedrito said.

The little party ascended the gentle slope of the hill, and entered the cave on horseback, without leaving any trace of their passage. There were several entrances to the cave; it was divided into several compartments that had no visible communication, and formed a species of labyrinth that meandered under the hill. The bomberos, who knew all its turnings, often employed it as a refuge.

Pepe and Lopez were seated before a heather fire, silently smoking their pipes, and watching a leg of guanaco roasting. They saluted the new-comers, and then remained dumb as the Indians, whose manner they had to some extent assumed in their nomadic life on the pampa. Pedrito conducted the two ladies to a separate compartment.

"While here," he said to them, in a low whisper, "say but little, for you can never tell what neighbours you may have. If you want us, you know where we are; I now leave you."

His sister caught his arm and put her lips to his ear, and he went away without making any answer.

The two girls, when alone, threw themselves into each other's arms. When this outburst was over, they prepared to disguise themselves as Indian women. At the moment when their Spanish dresses were about to fall, they heard footsteps close to them, and turned like startled fawns.

"I was afraid," Dona Concha said, "lest it was Don Pedro; let us listen."

"Carai, Don Torribio, you are welcome," a man's voice said, hardly three yards from the girls; "I have been waiting for you for more than two hours."

"Always that man!" Concha murmured.

"My good fellow," Don Torribio replied, "it was impossible for me to come sooner."

"Well, here you are, that is the main point," the first speaker remarked.

At this moment Pedrito entered; Mercedes made him a sign to listen, and he came to her side.

"Are you satisfied with your position at Carmen?" Torribio continued.

"Not very greatly, I confess."

"I am going to liberate you, my dear Pincheira; I shall order the attack on Poblacion del Sur to-morrow, and then you will act, I suppose."

"That is settled. By-the-by, I just now came across a poor devil of an officer, entrusted with a despatch for the governor of El Carmen; it announces help, I suppose."

"*Caramba!* they must make haste. What did you do with the despatch?"

"Here it is."

"Did you kill the messenger?"

"Well, I fancy so."

"That is right."

"When is the assault to take place?"

"In two days. How is my prisoner, by the way?"

"Oh, he is furious."

"He will grow calm. This is what I intend to do, soon as the town——"

But while these words were being spoken, the two men had retired, and the sound of their voices died out in the windings of the cave. When the maidens turned round again Pedrito had disappeared.

"Well," Mercedes said, "what do you think of that singular accident?"

"It is a miracle of Heaven."

"Shall we still disguise ourselves?"

"More so than ever."

"For what purpose?" Pedrito said, who had returned. I know where Don Sylvio is, and I undertake to restore him to you."

"But our vengeance?" Dona Concha interrupted.

"Let us save him first. Return to the estancia, senorita, and leave me to act."

"No, Don Pedro, I shall not leave you."

"Wait for me here, then, both of you."

Several hours passed, and Pedrito did not return. Alarmed by this inexplicable delay, the two girls joined the other bomberos in the front cave. Night had set in when Pedrito returned; he brought an enormous bale on the neck of his horse, which was panting with fatigue.

"Put on these gauchos' dresses," he said to the two ladies; "we are going to get inside Carmen. The journey will be a rough one, but make haste, for every moment lost is an hour of danger for us."

They ran off to dress themselves, and were ready in a moment.

"Take your Indian robes," Pedrito said, "for they may be useful to you. Good; now follow me, and be cautious."

The three bomberos, the two girls, and Patito left the cave, and glided through the darkness like shadows, marching in Indian file, at one moment stooping down to the ground, crawling on their knees, and trying as far as possible to hide their passage. It was a singular and dangerous journey, in the depths of night, and across a desert whose thickets in time of war are peopled with invisible enemies. Pedrito had placed himself at the head of the party. Dona Concha, excited by the courage which love imparts, stained the prickles with her blood, but not a single complaint passed her lips. After three hours of extraordinary effort, the little party that followed Pedrito's track suddenly stopped on his stopping.

"Look!" he said to them in a whisper, "we are in the heart of the Aucas' camp."

All around them in the moonbeams they saw the Indian sentinels leaning on their lances and watching over the safety of their brothers. A shudder ran over the maidens; fortunately, the guards, not fearing a sortie from Carmen, were sleeping at their posts, but the slightest badly-calculated movement or stumble might wake them. Hence Pedrito recommended them to redouble their prudence if they wished to save their lives.

About two hundred yards in front of them rose the first houses of Carmen, gloomy, silent, and apparently at least deserted or plunged in silence. The six adventurers had cleared one half the distance, when suddenly, at the moment when Pedrito stretched out his arm to shelter himself behind a sand-hill, several men, crawling on the opposite side, found themselves face to face with him.

There was a moment of terrible anxiety.

"Who goes there?" a low and threatening voice asked.

"Pedrito, the bombero."

"Who is with you?"

"My brothers."

"Pass!"

Ten minutes after this encounter they reached the barriers, which were at once opened on Pedrito mentioning his name, and they were at length safe in Carmen. It was high time; in spite of their resolution and courage, the two girls, worn out with fatigue, could no longer support themselves. So soon as the danger had passed, their nervous excitement gave way, and they fell utterly exhausted. Pedrito raised his sister in his arms; Pepe took charge of Dona Concha, and they proceeded to Don Valentine's house, where fresh difficulties awaited them. Tio Peralta refused to open the gate, but on at length recognising his mistress, he led the travellers into a room and lit the candles.

"What are we to do now?" Dona Concha asked, as she fell back into a chair.

"Nothing just at present," Pedrito answered. "Rest yourself, senorita, and regain your strength."

"Shall we remain for long in this state of inaction, which kills us?"

"Only till to-morrow. We must not run blindly into danger, but prepare everything for the success of our plans, and watch for the propitious moment. To-morrow, at the latest, those men whose conversation we overheard will attempt an attack on Poblacion del Sur. As for us, we shall be more at liberty to enter the Indian camp. Keep your presence in Carmen a secret from everybody, and give no sign of life till I return. Good-bye till to-morrow morning."

"Are you not going to rest, Don Pedro?"

"I have no time."

Pedrito left the room. Dona Concha recommended the utmost silence to Tio Peralta, and dismissed her companions, who went off to sleep in hastily-prepared apartments.

Mercedes would not separate from her friend, and they reposed on the same couch. In spite of their wish to remain awake, nature was the stronger, and they soon fell into a deep sleep. The sun was already high on the horizon when they opened their eyes again. They dressed themselves and breakfasted with their companions, impatiently awaiting the bombero's return.

Several hours passed, lacerating Dona Concha's heart, and making her love bleed; the recollection of her betrothed husband, covered with the shadow of death, painfully troubled her thoughts.

At length the town bells rang out a full peal to call the population

under arms, and acted as a gloomy accompaniment to the dull booming of the cannon and the flashes of the musketry-fire. Without doubt the Indians were attacking Poblacion del Sur: but where was Pedrito? Dona Concha asked herself, as she walked, like a lioness in a cage, up and down the room, devoured by anxiety and despair.

"Listen!" she said to Mercedes, as she turned her head towards the door.

"It is he!" Mercedes replied.

"At last!" Conchita exclaimed.

"Here I am, senorita," Pedrito said; "are you ready?"

"Ever since the morning," she answered, reproachfully.

"It would have been too soon," he said quietly; "now if you like."

"At once."

"Senorita, be dumb; whatever you may hear and see, leave me to speak and act alone. Stay! here is a mask for each of you, with which you will conceal your faces. When I give the word, come in."

All the three left the house without attracting attention, for the townspeople were guarding the barricades or engaged in the furious contest going on in Poblacion.

CHAPTER XIX.

DON TORRIBIO'S HOUSE.

DON SYLVIO D'ARENAL, so soon as his sword slipped from his grasp, and he fell by the side of the capataz, gave no signs of life. The masked men, despising Blas Sallazar, went up to Dona Concha's betrothed husband. The pallid hues of death clouded his handsome, noble face; his teeth were clenched under his half-parted lips; the blood flowed profusely from his wounds, and his closed hand still clutched the hilt of his sword, which had been broken in the fight.

"*Caspita!*" one of the bandits remarked, "here is a young gentleman who is very ill. What will the master say?"

"What would you have him say, Senor Panchito?" another objected. "He defended himself like a maddened panther; it is his own fault; he ought to have been more polite to us. We have lost four men."

"A fine loss, on my word—those scamps!" Panchito said, with a shrug of his shoulders; "I should have preferred his killing six and being in a better condition himself."

"Hang it," the bandit muttered, "that is kind towards us."

"Present parties excepted," Panchita added, with a laugh; "but quick,

bind up his wounds and let us be off. This is not a proper place for us, and besides, the master is waiting for us."

Don Sylvio's wounds were bathed and bound up somehow or another; and, without troubling themselves whether he was dead or alive, they laid him across the horse of Panchito, the leader of this expedition. The dead remained on the spot as a prey for the wild beasts. The other masked men set out at a gallop, and at the expiration of two hours halted in front of the Cave of the Cougars, where Nocobotha and Pincheira were waiting for them.

"Well," the former shouted to them as soon as he saw them.

"The job is done," Panchito answered, laconically, as he got off his horse, and laid Don Sylvio on a bed of leaves.

"Is he dead?" Nocobotha asked, turning pale.

"Not much better," the gaucho answered, with a shake of his head.

"Villain!" the Indian shouted, beside himself with fury, "is that the way in which my orders are executed? Did I not command you to bring him to me alive?"

"Hum!" said Panchito, "I should like to see you try it. Armed only with a sword, he fought like ten men for more than twenty minutes. He killed four of us, and perhaps we should not have been here now if his weapon had not broken."

"You are cowards," the master said, with a smile of contempt.

He went up to Don Sylvio's body.

"Is he dead?" Pincheira coolly asked him.

"No," Nocobotha replied.

"All the worse."

"On the contrary, I would give a great deal to see him recover."

"Nonsense," the Chilean officer said; "what do we care for this man's life? Was he not your personal enemy?"

"That is the very reason why I should not like him to die."

"I do not understand you."

"My friend," Nocobotha said, "I have devoted my life to the accomplishment of an idea to which I have sacrificed my hatreds and friendships."

"Why in that case lay a trap for your rival?"

"My rival? No, it is not he whom I have attacked."

"Who then?"

"The richest and most influential man in the colony; the man who may thwart my plans; a powerful adversary, a Spaniard, but not a rival. Nothing permanent is founded on corpses. I would have willingly killed him in battle, but I do not wish to make a martyr of him."

"Nonsense," Pincheira said, "one more or one less, what matter?"

"Brute," Nocobotha thought, "he has not understood a word I said."

Two gauchos, aided by Panchito, incessantly rubbed with rum the temples and chest of Don Sylvio, whose features retained the rigidity of death. The Indian chief drew his knife from his girdle, wiped the blade, and placed it to the wounded man's lips. It seemed to him as if it were slightly tarnished. He at once kneeled down by the

side of Don Sylvio, raised the cuff of his left coat-sleeve, and pricked the vein with the sharp point of his knife. Gradually a black dot appeared on the wound, and became enlarged to the size of a pea. This drop hesitated, trembled, and at length ran down the arm, pushed on by a second drop, that made room for a third; then the blood became less black and less thick, and a long vermilion jet gushed forth, which announced life. Nocobotha could not repress a cry of joy: Don Sylvio was saved!

Almost immediately the young man gave a deep sigh.

"Continue the rubbing," the chief said to the gauchos.

He bound up Don Sylvio's arm, rose, and made a sign to Pincheira to follow him to another part of the cave.

"Heaven has granted my prayer," the great chief said, "and I thank it for having spared me a crime."

"If you are satisfied," the other remarked, in surprise, "I have no objection to offer."

"That is not all. Don Sylvio's wounds, though numerous, are not serious; his lethargy is the result of the loss of blood and the speed with which he was brought here. He will regain his senses presently."

"Good."

"He must not see me."

"What next?"

"Or recognise you."

"That is difficult."

"It is important."

"I will try my best."

"I am about to leave you. You will have Don Sylvio conveyed to Carmen."

"To your house?"

"Yes; it is the safest spot," Nocobotha said, as he drew from his pocket a paper folded after a peculiar fashion; "but he must not know, under any pretext, that I gave the orders, nor where he is; and, above all, he must not go out."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, and you will answer to me for his safety."

"On your order I will produce him to you alive or dead."

"Alive, I tell you; his life is precious to me."

"Well," Pincheira replied, "since you are so anxious about your prisoner, not a hair of his head shall be touched."

"Thank you, and good-bye, Pincheira."

The chief mounted a magnificent mustang, and disappeared in the windings of the road. Pincheira returned to the wounded man with a look of ill-temper, and twisting his moustache. He was dissatisfied with Nocobotha's orders; but as he possessed only one virtue, respect for his word, he resigned himself.

"How is he?" he asked Panchito, in a whisper.

"Not so bad, captain; it is astonishing what good the bleeding did him. He has already opened his eyes twice, and has even attempted to speak."

"In that case, there is no time to be lost. Bind his eyes, and, to prevent his tearing the bandage off, fasten his hands to his side; act gently if you can manage it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, captain."

"In ten minutes we start."

Don Sylvio, who had gradually regained his senses, asked himself into what hands he had fallen. His presence of mind had also returned, and he offered no resistance when the gauchos carried out the orders of the Chilian officer. These precautions satisfied him that his life would not be taken.

"Captain, what is to be done now?" said the gaucho.

"Carry him to the boat tied up down there; and do not shake him, scoundrels, or I will blow out your brains."

"Carai!" the gaucho said, with a grimace.

"Yes," Pincheira said, with a shrug of his shoulders, "and that will teach you to kill people thoroughly another time."

Pincheira could not understand why Nocobotha so eagerly desired that Don Sylvio should live; and in his turn the gaucho did not understand why Pincheira regretted that he was not dead. The gaucho opened his dull eyes in amazement on hearing the chief's last remark, but hastened to obey.

Don Sylvio was carried down to the boat by Pincheira and two other gauchos, while the rest of the party, who took charge of the horses, returned to Carmen by land. The voyage in the boat was performed in silence, and three hours after the start the prisoner was lying on a bed in Don Torribio Carvajal's house. Then the gag was removed and his hands were untied; but a masked and silent man stood on the threshold of the door, like a statue, and never once took his eyes off him.

Don Sylvio, worn out by the emotions of the day, weakened by the loss of blood, and trusting to chance to get him out of his incomprehensible position, took that investigating glance around which is peculiar to prisoners, and fell into a heavy sleep, which lasted several hours, and restored to his mind all its calmness and original lucidity.

However, he was treated with the utmost respect, and his slightest caprices were satisfied. In fact, his situation was endurable, and, after all, was not without a certain spice of originality. Hence the young man, feeling reassured, bravely made up his mind to wait for better times. On the third day of his captivity his wounds were almost cicatrised. He got up to try his strength, and, perhaps, to reconnoitre the chance of escaping, for what can people think in prison save about getting out of it? A warm and cheering sunbeam entered through the crack of the closed shutter, and traced long white stripes on the ceiling of his room. This sunbeam revived his spirits, and he took several steps under the inevitable eye of the dumb and masked watchman.

All at once a formidable noise broke out in the vicinity, and a discharge of cannon made the windows rattle.

"What is that?" he asked the masked man.

The latter shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply.

The sharp crack of musketry-fire was mingled with the boom of the guns. The dumb man closed the window. Don Sylvio walked up to him.

"My friend," he said to him, in a gentle voice, "what is going on outside?"

The gaoler remained obstinately silent.

"In Heaven's name speak!"

The noise seemed to draw nearer, and hurried footsteps were mingled with the shouts. The man in the mask drew his machete from its sheath and his pistol from his belt, and ran to the door, which was suddenly burst open. Another masked bandit, evidently suffering from great terror, dashed into the room.

"Look out!" he shouted. "We are lost!"

At these words four men, also masked and armed to the teeth, appeared in the doorway.

"Back!" the gaoler cried; "no one enters here without the password."

"There it is," said one of the new-comers, and he laid him dead with a pistol-shot. The four men passed over his body and secured his companion, who had sought refuge in a corner, and was trembling all over. One of them then walked up to the prisoner, who comprehended nothing of this scene.

"You are free, caballero!" he said to him. "Come, make haste to fly far from this house."

"Who are you?" the young man asked.

"No matter; follow us."

"No; unless I know who you are."

"Do you wish to see Dona Concha again?" the speaker whispered in his ear.

"I will follow you," Don Sylvio answered, with a blush.

"Senor, take these weapons, which you will perhaps require, as all is not finished yet."

"Weapons!" the young man exclaimed. "Oh, you are friends."

They went out.

"What!" Don Sylvio said, as he entered the courtyard, "I am in Carmen."

"Were you not aware of it?"

"No."

"These saddled horses fastened to the rings are ours. Can you sit a horse?"

"I hope so."

"You must."

"Mount, then, and let us be off."

As they turned into the street a dozen horsemen dashed up towards them, at a distance of about five-and-twenty paces.

"Here is the enemy," the stranger said, in a firm voice; "take your bridles in your teeth, and let us charge."

The four men ranged themselves in a single line, and rushed at the new-comers. They discharged firearms and drew their sabres.

"Carai!" shouted Pincheira, who commanded the twelve horsemen, "my prisoner is escaping from me."

The Chilian officer darted in pursuit of Don Sylvio, who fired two shots at him without relaxing his speed. Pincheira's horse rolled on the ground, dragging down its rider, who got up again, greatly shaken by his fall; but Don Sylvio and his comrades were already far away.

"Oh, I shall find them again!" he shouted, with rage.

The fugitives had reached the river's bank, where a boat was waiting for them.

"We shall separate here, senor," the stranger said to Don Sylvio, as he removed his mask.

"Pedrito!" he exclaimed.

"Myself!" the bombero answered. "This boat will take you to the estancia of San Julian. Start without delay, and," he added, as he stooped down to Don Sylvio's ear, and handed him a folded paper, "read this, and perhaps you will soon be able to come to our assistance. Good-bye, senor."

"One word, Pedrito. Who is the man that held me prisoner?"

"Don Torribio Carvajal."

"Thank you."

"Or, if you prefer it, Nocobotha, the great chief of the Aucas."

"Which of the two?"

"They are the same."

"I will remember," Don Sylvio said, as he leaped into the boat.

The skiff glided over the water with the speed of an arrow, owing to the vigour of the rowers, and soon disappeared in the gathering darkness.

Three persons who remained on the bank looked anxiously after the movements of the boat. They were Pedrito, Mercedes, and Dona Concha.

CHAPTER XX.

THE INDIAN CAMP.

"AND now, senorita," Pedrito asked Dona Concha, when the boat was out of sight, "what are your intentions?"

"To see Nocobotha in the camp."

"It is dishonour; it is death."

"No, Don Pedro, it is revenge,"

"You mean it?"

"I am resolved."

"Good; I will myself lead you to the camp of the Aucas."

All three returned to Don Valentine Cardoso's house without exchanging a word. Night had completely set in; the streets were deserted, the silent town was illumined by the flames of Poblacion del Sur, and the diabolical outlines of the Indians could be seen passing among the ruins and crumbling walls.

"Go and get ready, sencritas; I will wait for you here," Pedrito said, with a melancholy accent.

Mercedes and Dona Concha entered the house. Pedrito, thoughtful and sad, sat down on one of the steps in front of the houses. The two girls soon reappeared, dressed in full Aucas costume, with painted faces, and impossible to recognise.

"Oh!" said the bombero, "here are two real Indian girls."

"Do you believe," Dona Concha asked him, "that Don Torribio alone possesses the privilege of changing himself at his pleasure?"

"Who can contend with a woman?" Pedrito said, shaking his head; "and now, what do you demand of me?"

"Your protection to the first Indian lines."

"And afterwards?"

"The rest is our business."

"But you do not intend to remain alone in the midst of the pagans?"

"We must, Don Pedro."

"Mercedes," the latter continued, "do you wish to fall again into the hands of your persecutors?"

"Reassure yourself, brother; I run no risk."

"Still——"

"I answer for her," Dona Concha interrupted him.

"Well, Heaven be merciful to you!" he muttered, with an air of doubt.

"Let us start," said Don Sylvio's affianced wife, as she wrapped herself up in a spacious cloak.

Pedrito walked before them. The dying fires of Carmen lit up the night with a pale and uncertain gleam; a leaden silence brooded over the town, only interrupted at intervals by the hoarse croaking of the birds of prey that were tearing the Spanish and Indian corpses. The three persons walked through the ruins, stumbling against tottering walls, striding over bodies, and disturbing the horrible festival of the urubus and vultures, which fled away with heavy wings. They went through nearly the entire length of the town, and at length arrived, after a thousand windings and difficulties, at one of the barriers that faced the Indian camp, the fires of which could be seen sparkling a short distance off, and from which fearful yells reached their ears.

The bombero exchanged a few words with the sentries, and passed through the barricade.

"Dona Concha," he said, in a choking voice, "there is the Indian camp before us."

"I thank you, Don Pedro," she answered, offering him her hand.

"Senorita," Pedrito added, retaining the young lady's hand, "there

is still time ; give up your fatal plan, since your betrothed is saved, and return to San Julian."

"Good-bye," Dona Concha answered.

"Good-bye," the man repeated sorrowfully. "Mercedes, I implore you to remain with me."

"Where she goes, I will go, brother."

The leave-taking was short, and the bombero, so soon as he was alone, uttered a sigh, or rather a burst of sorrow, and returned to Carmen at a sharp pace.

"I trust I may not arrive too late," he said to himself, "and that he has not yet seen Don Antonio Valverde."

He reached the fort at the moment when Don Torribio and the governor were crossing the drawbridge, but, absorbed in his own thoughts, he did not perceive the two horsemen. This accident was the cause of an irreparable misfortune.

As for the two girls, they proceeded towards the camp fires, a short distance from which they halted to regain breath and calm the movement of their hearts, which beat as if ready to start from their breasts. When near the danger they voluntarily sought, they felt their courage abandon them ; the sight of the Indian toldos made their blood run cold with terror. Strange to say, it was Mercedes who revived her companion's firmness.

"Senorita," she said to her, "I will be your guide ; we will leave these cloaks here, which would cause us to be recognised. Walk by my side, and whatever may happen, display neither surprise nor fear, and, before all, say not a word, or it will be all over with us !"

"I will obey," Concha answered.

"We are," Mercedes continued, "two Indian girls who have made a vow to Gualichu for the recovery of their wounded father. Remember, not a word, my friend."

"Let us go on, and may Heaven protect us."

"So be it !" Mercedes replied, crossing herself.

They set out again, and within five minutes entered the camp, where the Indians were giving way to the most extravagant joy. Nothing could be heard on all sides but songs and yells. Drunk with aguardiente, they danced in a burlesque fashion among empty barrels, which they had plundered from Poblacion del Sur and the estancias. There was a wondrous disorder and a strange confusion, and all these raving madmen even ignored the authority of their ulmens, the majority of whom, however, were in a state of the most disgusting intoxication.

Owing to the general uproar, Concha and Mercedes were enabled to cross the camp-lines unseen ; then, with palpitating hearts, limbs rigid with terror, but calm faces, they glided like lizards through the groups, passing unperceived by the drunken men, who stumbled against each other at every moment. The girls seemed lost in this human labyrinth, wandering haphazard, and trusting to Providence or their lucky stars to discover the abode of the great toqui in this confused mass of toldos. They walked about for a long time, but rendered bolder by their success in avoiding any unpleasant encounter, and feeling less timid, they

exchanged at times a hoping glance, till all at once an Indian of athletic build seized Dona Concha round the waist, lifted her from the ground like a child, and imprinted a hearty kiss on her neck.

At this unexpected outrage Concha uttered a cry of terror, disengaged herself from the Indian's grasp, and forcibly thrust him away from her. The savage tottered on his drunken legs, and measured his length of six feet on the ground; but he sprang up again at once, and leapt on the maiden like a jaguar.

Mercedes interposed between them.

"Back!" she said, courageously, laying her hand on the Indian's chest; "this woman is my sister."

"Churlakin," another chief said, "do not put up with an insult."

The savage frowned and drew his knife.

"Do you wish to kill her?" Mercedes exclaimed in horror.

"Yes," Churlakin answered, "unless she will follow me to my toldo, where she will be the squaw of a chief—a great chief."

"You are mad," Mercedes retorted; "your toldo is full, and there is no room for another fire."

"There is still room for two fires," the Indian answered, with a laugh; "and since this woman is your sister, you shall come with her."

In the course of this discussion an impenetrable circle of savages surrounded the two girls and Churlakin. Mercedes did not know how to escape the danger.

"Well," Churlakin continued, seizing Dona Concha's hair, which he rolled round his wrist, and brandishing his knife, "will you and your sister follow me to my toldo?"

Dona Concha, who had sunk down to the ground, awaited the death-stroke with pallid face and closed eyes. Mercedes drew herself up and checked the arm that was ready to strike.

"Since you insist on it, dog!" she said to the chief, in a haughty voice, "your destiny shall be accomplished. Look at me. Gualichu does not allow his slaves to be insulted with impunity."

She turned her face towards a huge fire flashing a few yards off, and which threw a bright light over the surrounding objects. The Indians uttered a cry of surprise on recognising her, and fell back. Churlakin himself let go of Dona Concha's hair.

"Oh!" he said, in consternation, "it is the white slave of the tree of Gualichu!"

The circle round the two girls had grown larger; but the superstitious Indians, nailed to the ground by terror, looked at them fixedly.

"The power of Gualichu," Mercedes added, "is great and terrible. It is he who sends me; woe to the man who would try to thwart his designs!"

And seizing the arm of Dona Concha, who was still trembling with terror, she advanced with a firm step. Waving her arm authoritatively, the circle divided, and the Indians fell back to the right and left, making way for them to pass.

"I feel as if I were dying," Dona Concha murmured.

"Courage, senorita; we are saved."

"Oh, oh!" a mocking voice said; "what is going on here?"

And a man placed himself in front of the girls, and looked impudently at them.

"The matchi!" cried the Indians, who, reassured by the presence of their sorcerer, again assembled round the prisoners.

Mercedes trembled inwardly on seeing her stratagem compromised by the advent of the matchi, and at the suggestion of despair she made a final effort.

"Gualichu, who loves the Indians," she said, "has sent me to the matchi of the Aucas."

"Ah!" the sorcerer answered, in a mocking accent, "and what does he want with me?"

"No one but yourself must hear it."

The matchi walked up to the maiden, laid his hand on her shoulder, and looked hard at her.

"Will you save me?" she asked him in a low voice.

"That depends," the fellow answered.

She repressed a look of disgust.

"Stay," she said, as she removed from her arms her rich gold bracelets, set with fine pearls.

"Och!" said the Indian, as he concealed them, "that is fine; what does my daughter want?"

"Deliver us from these men."

"Fly!" the matchi shouted, turning round; "this woman is under an evil spell. Fly!"

The sorcerer had immediately put on a face adapted to the circumstances; his mysterious conversation with the white woman and the terror depicted on his features were sufficient for the Indians, who, without stopping to ask any questions, dispersed in all directions, and disappeared behind the toldos.

"You see," the sorcerer said, with a smile of pride, "I am powerful, and can avenge myself on those who deceive me. But where does my white daughter come from?"

"From the tree of Gualichu," she answered boldly.

"My daughter has the forked tongue of the cougar," the matchi replied, who believed neither in his own words nor in his god; "does she take me for a nandu?"

"Here is a magnificent collar of pearls which Gualichu gave me for the inspired man of the Aucas."

"Oh!" said the sorcerer; "what service can I render my daughter?"

"Lead us to the toldo of the great chief."

"Does my daughter desire to speak with Nocobotha?"

"I do."

"Nocobotha is a wise chief; will he receive a woman?"

"He must."

"It is well. But this other woman?" he asked, pointing to Dona Concha.

"She is a friend of Pincheira's; she also wishes to speak with the great toqui."

"The warriors will spin wool," the sorcerer said, shaking his head, "since women wage war."

"My father is mistaken; Nocobotha loves his sister."

"No," the Indian said.

"Will my father make haste? Nocobotha is waiting for us," Mercedes continued, impatient at the savage's tergiversation; "where is the toldo of the great chief?"

"Follow me, my white daughters."

He placed himself between them, seized an arm of each, and guided them through the inextricable labyrinth of the camp. The terrified Indians fled as they passed. In his heart the matchi was satisfied with Mercedes' presents, and the opportunity for proving to the warriors his intimate relations with Gualichu. The marching and counter-marching lasted a quarter of an hour, and at last they found themselves before a toldo in front of which was planted the token of the united nations, surrounded by lances fringed with scarlet, and guarded by four warriors.

"It is here," he said to Mercedes.

"Good! My father will let us go in alone."

"Must I leave you, then?"

"Yes, but my father can wait for us outside."

"I will wait," the sorcerer said briefly, as he looked suspiciously at the maidens.

They went in with sorely beating hearts. The toldo was empty.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TOLDO OF THE GREAT TOQUI.

DON ANTONIO VALVERDE, delighted at the succour the president of the Argentine Republic sent him, rode at a gallop by the side of the new colonel, Don Torribio. They soon reached a barrier, guarded by a large body of gauchos and armed colonists.

"We must go out here," Don Torribio said to the governor; "but, as the night is dark, and we have one or two leagues to ride, it would be imprudent to venture alone upon a plain traversed by vagabond Indians."

"That is true," Don Antonio interrupted him.

"The governor must not risk his life lightly; suppose you were made prisoner, for instance, what a blow it would be for the colony!"

"You speak sensibly, Don Torribio. Let us take an escort."

"Of how many men?"

"Ten will be enough."

"We had better take twenty, for we may come across a hundred Indians."

"Twenty, then, if you wish it, Don Antonio," the other answered, with a sardonic smile.

On the governor's arrival the defenders of the fort had got under arms. Don Torribio detailed twenty horsemen, who by his orders formed up behind him.

"Are we ready to start, governor?"

"Let us be off."

The escort, having the two colonels at its head, started in the direction of the plain. Torribio had delighted Don Antonio Valverde for three quarters of an hour by the rolling fire of his witty remarks, when he was interrupted by him.

"Pardon me, colonel," the governor said anxiously, "but does it not appear singular to you that we have as yet met nobody?"

"Not the least in the world, senor," Torribio answered; "of course they are awaiting my return."

"That is quite possible," the governor remarked, after a moment's reflection.

"In that case we shall have another league to ride."

"Let us go on, then."

Don Torribio's vein of humour was exhausted, while Don Antonio remained silent. All at once the distant neighing of a horse reached their ears.

"What's that?" Torribio asked.

"Probably the men we are seeking."

"In any case let us be prudent. Wait for me; I will go ahead as scout."

He galloped forward and disappeared in the gloom. When a certain distance off, he dismounted and put his ears to the ground.

"Demonios!" he muttered, as he got up and leapt on to his horse again; "we are pursued. Can that Satan of a Pedrito have recognised me?"

"What's the matter?" the governor asked.

"Nothing," Torribio replied, laying his left hand on his arm. "Don Antonio Valverde, surrender; you are my prisoner."

"Are you mad, Don Torribio?"

"No longer call me Don Torribio, senor," the young man said in a hollow voice; "I am Nocobotha, the great chief of the Patagonian natives."

"Treachery!" the governor shouted; "help, gauchos, defend me!"

"It is useless, colonel, for those men belong to me."

"I will not surrender," the governor continued; "Don Torribio, or whoever you may be, you are a coward!"

He freed himself from the young man's grasp by a bound of his horse, and drew his sabre.

The rapid gallop of several horses was heard.

"Can that be help arriving for me?" the governor said, as he cocked a pistol.

"Yes, but too late," the Indian chief answered coldly.

By his orders the gauchos surrounded the commandant, who killed two of them. From this moment the fight in the dark became frightful. Don Antonio, seeing that his life was lost, wished, at least, to die as a soldier should die, and fought desperately.

The sound of the galloping horses constantly drew nearer.

Nocobotha saw that it was time to finish, and with a pistol-shot killed the governor's horse. Don Antonio rolled on the sand, but, jumping up suddenly, he dealt his adversary a sabre-stroke, which the latter parried by leaping on one side.

"A man such as I am does not surrender to dogs like you!" Don Antonio exclaimed, as he blew out his own brains.

This explosion was followed by a sharp discharge of musketry, and a squadron of horsemen rushed like a whirlwind on the gauchos. The contest hardly lasted a moment. At a whistle from Nocobotha the gauchos turned round and fled separately over the dark plain. Eight corpses strewed the ground.

"Too late!" Pedrito said to Major Bloomfield, who had started in pursuit of Don Torribio so soon as the bombero warned him of the peril into which the Indian had led the governor.

"Yes," said the major, sorrowfully; "he was a good soldier. But how are we to catch the traitors?"

"They are already in the Indian camp."

Pedrito leapt from his horse, cut with his machete a branch of resinous fir, which he made into a torch, and by its light examined the bodies stretched on the ground.

"Here he is!" the bombero exclaimed; "his skull is fearfully fractured; his hand grasps a pistol; but his face still retains an expression of haughty defiance."

A tear rolled down Major Bloomfield's face.

"Why was my old friend fated thus to die in an ambushade?" the Englishman murmured.

"God is the Master," Pedrito philosophically remarked.

"He has performed his duty, so let us perform ours."

They raised the body of Don Antonio Valverde, and then the whole squadron returned to Carmen.

Nocobotha, however, we must remark, had only wished to make the colonel prisoner in order to treat with the colonists, and shed as little blood as possible, and he bitterly regretted the governor's death. While the gauchos were rejoicing at the success of the trap, Nocobotha, gloomy and dissatisfied, returned to his camp.

Mercedes and Dona Concha, on seeing the toldo of the great chief unoccupied, could not repress a sigh of satisfaction. They had the time

to recover from their emotion in his absence, and prepare for the interview which Concha desired to have with him. They had removed their Indian garb in all haste, and resumed their Spanish attire. By an accident that favoured the plans of Don Sylvio's betrothed wife, she was lovelier and more seductive than usual; her pallor had a touching and irresistible grace about it, and her eyes flashed eager flames of love or hatred.

When Nocobotha arrived in front of the toldo, the matchi walked up to him.

"What do you want?" the chief asked.

"My father will pardon me," the sorcerer answered, humbly. "This night two women have entered the camp."

"What do I care?" the chief interrupted him.

"These women, though dressed in the Indian fashion, are white," the matchi said.

"They are doubtless wives of the gauchos."

"No," the sorcerer said; "their hands are too white, and their feet too small. Besides, one of them is the white slave of the tree of Gualichu."

"Ah! And who made them prisoners?"

"No one; they arrived alone."

"Alone?"

"I accompanied them through the camp, and protected them against curiosity."

"You acted well."

"I introduced them into my father's toldo."

"Are they there now?"

"For the last hour."

"I thank my brother."

Nocobotha took off one of his bracelets and threw it to the matchi, who bowed down to the ground.

The chief, suffering from indescribable agitation, rushed towards his toldo, the curtain of which he raised with a feverish hand, and he could not restrain a cry of delight and astonishment on hearing Dona Concha's voice.

The maiden greeted him with one of those strange and charming smiles of which women alone possess the secret.

"What is the meaning of this?" the chief asked, with a graceful bow.

Dona Concha involuntarily admired the young man; his splendid costume, flashing in the light, heightened his masculine and proud attitude, and his head was haughtily erect. He was very handsome, and born to command.

"By what name shall I address you, caballero?" she said to him, as she pointed to a seat of carved copal-wood by her side.

"That depends, senorita. If you address the Spaniard, call me Don Torribio; if you have come to speak to the Indian, my brothers call me Nocobotha."

"We shall see," she said.

During a momentary silence the two speakers examined each other

aside. Dona Concha did not know how to begin, and the chief himself was seeking the motive for such a visit.

"Did you really wish to see me?" Nocobotha at length began.

"Who else?" she replied.

"The happiness of seeing you here appears to me a dream, and I fear lest I should awake from it."

This remark reminded her of Don Valentine Cardoso's guest, and did not agree with the ornaments of an Indian chief and the interior of a toldo.

"Good gracious!" Dona Concha said, lightly, "you are not far removed from believing me a witch or a fairy, so I will break my wand."

"For all that you will not be the less an enchantress," Nocobotha interrupted her, with a smile.

"The sorcerer is this child's brother, who revealed to me your real name and the spot where I might find you. You must give Pedrito all the credit."

"I shall not forget it when an opportunity offers," he answered, with a frown, which did not escape Dona Concha's notice; "but let us return to yourself, senorita. Would it be an indiscretion to ask you to what extraordinary circumstance I owe the favour of a visit which I did not anticipate, but which overwhelms me with joy?"

"Oh, a very simple cause," she replied, giving him a fiery look.

"I am listening, madam."

"Perhaps you wish to make me undergo an examination?"

"Oh! I trust that you do not think what you are saying."

"Don Torribio, we live in such unhappy times, that a person can never be sure of addressing a friend."

"I am yours, madam."

"I hope so, and even believe it, hence I will speak to you in the most perfect confidence. A girl of my age, and especially of my rank, does not take a step so singular without very serious motives."

"I am convinced of that."

"What can make a woman lay aside her instinctive modesty, and cause her to disdain even her reputation? what feeling inspires her with masculine courage? It is not love, Don Torribio; love—do you understand me?"

"Yes, madam," he answered, with emotion.

"Well, I have said it; it is a question of my heart and of yours—perhaps—Don Torribio. At our last interview my father announced rather suddenly, both to you and me, my approaching marriage with Don Sylvio d'Arenal. I had thought you loved me——"

"Senorita!"

"But at that moment I became certain of it; I saw your sudden pallor; your voice was troubled."

"Still!——"

"I am a woman, Don Torribio; we women guess a man's love before a man himself does so."

The Indian chief gazed at her with an undefinable expression.

"A few days later," she continued, "Don Sylvio fell into an ambuscade. Why did you do that, Don Torribio?"

"I wished to avenge myself on a rival, but I did not order his death."

"I knew it."

Nocobotha did not understand her.

"You had no rival—you had scarce left the house ere I confessed to my father that I did not love Don Sylvio, and would not marry him."

"O Heavens!" the young man exclaimed, sorrowfully.

"Reassure yourself, the misfortune is repaired; Don Sylvio is not dead."

"Who told you so?"

"I know it, I know it so well that Don Sylvio, torn from Pincheira's hands by my orders, is at this moment at the estancia de San Julian, whence he will shortly set out for Buenos Ayres."

"Can I——"

"That is not all. I made my father understand towards whom my heart turned, and whose love it confided in, and my father, who has never been able to refuse me anything, permitted me to go and join the man whom I prefer."

She gave Don Torribio a glance full of love, looked down and blushed. A thousand contradictory feelings were contending in Nocobotha's heart, for he did not dare believe that which rendered him so happy; a doubt remained, a cruel doubt—suppose she were trifling with him?

"What!" he said, "you love me?"

"My presence here——" she stammered.

"Happiness renders me confused, so forgive me."

"If I did not love you," she answered, "Sylvio is free and I could marry him."

"Oh women! adorable creatures, who will ever sound the depths of your hearts! who can divine the sorrow or joy you conceal in a glance or in a smile? Yes, senorita, I love you, and I wish to tell you so on my knees."

And the great chief of the Patagonian nations threw himself at Dona Concha's feet; he pressed her hands and covered them with burning kisses. The maiden, who held her head erect, while he lay thus prostrate before her, had a ferocious delight in her eyes; she had repeated the eternal allegory of the lion that surrenders its claws to the scissors of love. This man, so powerful and formidable, was conquered, and henceforth she was sure of her vengeance.

"What shall I tell my father?" she said in a voice gentle as a caress.

The lion rose with flashing eyes and radiant brow.

"Madam," he answered, with supreme majesty, "tell Don Valentine Cardoso that within a month I shall place a crown on your beloved forehead."

CHAPTER XXII.

DELILAH.

It is rare for an extreme situation, when drawn to its utmost limits, to remain long in a state of tension; hence it is not surprising that Nocobotha, after advancing so far in his confiding love, should recoil terrified at the progress he had made. Man is so constituted that too much happiness embarrasses and alarms him, and it is, perhaps, a foreboding that this happiness will be of short duration. The Indian chief, whose heart overflowed like a brimming cup, felt a vague doubt mingle with his joy, and obscure it with a cloud. Still, it is pleasant to flatter one's self, and the young man yielded to this new intoxication and the pleasures of hope. These smiles, these looks, everything reassured him. Why had she come to him through so many dangers? She loves me, he thought, and love intensified the bandage which Dona Concha had fastened over his eyes with so much grace and perfidy.

Men of lofty intellect are nearly all unconsciously affected by a weakness that frequently causes their ruin, the more so because they believe nobody clever enough to cheat them. Had Nocobotha nothing to fear from this girl of fifteen, who avowed her love with such simplicity? But as his mind was, so to speak, turned away from real life to be absorbed in a single dream—the independence of his country—Nocobotha had never essayed to read that enigmatical book called a woman's heart; he was ignorant that a woman, especially an American woman, never forgives an insult offered to her lover, for he is her deity and is inviolable.

The man loved for the first time, and this first love, which is so sharp that at a later date all other loves grow pale at the mere remembrance of it, had sunk deeply into his heart. He loved, and the transient doubt which had saddened his thoughts could not struggle against a thought which was now irradicable.

"Can I," Concha asked, "remain in your camp without fear of being insulted, until my father arrives?"

"Command me, madam," the other answered; "you have only slaves here."

"This girl, to whom you owe my presence here, will proceed to the estancia of San Julian."

Nocobotha walked to the curtain of the toldo and clapped his hands twice. Lucaney appeared.

"Let a toldo be prepared for me, I give up this one to the two pale-face women," the chief said in the Aucas tongue. "A band of picked

warriors, selected by my brother, will watch over their safety night and day. Woe to the man who fails in respect to them! These women are sacred and free to come and go and receive any visitors they think proper. Have two horses saddled for me and for one of the white women."

Lucaney went out.

"You see, madam, that you are the queen here."

Dona Concha drew from her bosom a letter written beforehand and unsealed, which she handed to him, with a smile on her lips, but trembling at her heart.

"Read, Don Torribio, what I have written to my father."

"Oh, senorita!" he exclaimed, thrusting the note away.

Dona Concha slowly folded the letter without any apparent emotion, and delivered it to Mercedes.

"My child, you will give this to my father when alone, and explain to him what I have forgotten to say."

"Permit me to withdraw, madam."

"No," Concha replied, with a bewitching smile, "I have no secrets from you."

The young man smiled at this remark. At this moment the horses were brought up, and Dona Concha found time to whisper in Mercedes' ear the hurried words: "Your brother must be here in an hour."

Mercedes slightly closed her eyes as a sign of intelligence.

"I will accompany your friend myself," the chief said, "as far as the entrenchments of Carmen."

"I thank you, Don Torribio."

The two maidens tenderly embraced.

"In an hour," Dona Concha murmured.

"Good," Mercedes answered.

"You are at home here, madam," Nocobotha said to Dona Concha, who accompanied him to the entrance of the toldo.

Mercedes and the chief mounted their horses, the young Spanish girl followed them with eye and ear, and then re-entered the toldo.

"The game has begun, and he must reveal his plans to me."

In a quarter of an hour Mercedes and her guide came within fifty yards of Carmen without having exchanged a word.

"Here," said Nocobotha, "you no longer require my services."

He turned back and galloped towards the camp. The girl advanced boldly in the direction of the town, whose gloomy outline rose before her. But a vigorous hand seized her bridle, she felt a pistol placed against her bosom, and a low voice said in Spanish—

"Who goes there?"

"A friend," she replied, suppressing a shriek of terror.

"Mercedes!" the rude voice exclaimed, becoming much softer.

"Pedrito!" she replied, joyously, as she slipped into the arms of her brother, who embraced her affectionately.

"Where do you come from, little sister?"

"From the camp of the Patagonians."

"Already?"

"My mistress has sent me to you."

"Who accompanied you?"

"Nocobotha himself."

"Malediction!" the bombero said, "for five minutes I had him at the end of my rifle. Well, but come, we will talk inside."

"Oh!" Pedrito exclaimed, when Mercedes ended the narration of their expedition, "oh, women are demons, demons, and men plucked chickens; and your letter?"

"Here it is."

"Don Valentine must receive it to-night, for the poor father will be pining in mortal anxiety."

"I will carry it," said Mercedes.

"No; you need rest. I have a safe man here, who will ride to the estancia. You, little sister, come into the house, where a worthy woman, who knows me, will take care of you."

"Will you go to Dona Concha?"

"I should think so. Poor girl! alone among the pagans."

"Ever devoted, my kind brother!"

"It seems that is my vocation."

Pedrito led Mercedes to the house he had referred to, warmly recommended her to the hostess, and then turned into a street, in the middle of which a large fire was burning, and several men reposing round it, wrapped in their cloaks. The bombero roughly shook the foot of one of the sleepers.

"Come, come, Patito," he said to him, "up with you, my boy, and gallop to the estancia of San Julian."

"Why, I have just come from there," the gaucho muttered, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"The better reason; you must know the road. It is Dona Concha who sends you."

"If the senorita wishes it, of course," Patito said, whom the name thoroughly aroused. "What am I to do?"

"Mount your horse and carry this letter to Don Valentine; it is an important letter, you understand."

"Very good."

"Let nobody take it from you."

"Of course not."

"If you are killed——"

"I shall be killed."

"When you are dead it must not even be found on you."

"I will swallow it."

"The Indians will not think of ripping you up."

"A. l right."

"Be off."

"Only give me time to saddle my horse."

"Good-bye, Patito, and luck be with you."

Pedrito left the gaucho, who speedily started.

"It is now my turn," the bombero muttered. "How am I to reach Dona Concha?"

He scratched his head and frowned, but ere long his forehead became

unwrinkled, and he proceeded gaily to the fort. After a conference with Major Bloomfield, who had succeeded Don Antonio Valverde in command of the town, Pedrito doffed his clothes, and disguised himself as an Aucas. He then set out, slipped into the Indian camp, and shortly before sunrise was back again in the town.

"Well," his sister said to him.

"All goes well," the bombero answered. "*Viva Dios!* Nocobotha, I fancy, will pay dearly for carrying off Don Sylvio. Oh, women are demons!"

"Am I to go and join her?"

"No; it is unnecessary."

"And, without entering into any details, Pedrito, who was worn out with fatigue, selected a place to sleep in, and snored away, not troubling himself about the Indians.

Several days elapsed ere the besiegers renewed their attack on the town, which, however, they invested more closely. The Spaniards, strictly blockaded, and having no communication with the exterior, found their provisions running short, and hideous famine would soon pounce on its victims. Fortunately, the indefatigable Pedrito had an idea which he communicated to Major Bloomfield. He had a hundred and fifty loaves worked up with arsenic water, and vitriol mingled with twenty barrels of spirits; the whole, loaded on mules, was placed under the escort of Pedrito and his two brothers. The bomberos approached the Patagonian earthworks with this frugal stock of provisions. The Indians, who are passionately fond of firewater, rushed to meet the caravan, and seize the barrels. Pedrito and his brothers left their burden lying on the sand, and returned to the town at a gallop with the mules, which were intended to support the besieged if the Patagonians did not make the assault.

There was a high holiday in the camp. The loaves were cut up; the heads of the barrels stove in, and nothing was left. This orgie cost the Indians six thousand men, who died in atrocious tortures. The others, struck with horror, began disbanding in all directions. The chiefs were no longer respected. Nocobotha himself saw his authority wavering before the superstition of the savages, who believed in a celestial punishment. The prisoners, men, women, and children, were massacred with horrible refinements of barbarity. Dona Concha, though protected by the great chief, only owed her escape to chance or to God, who preserved her as the instrument of His will.

The rage of the Indians, having no one left to vent itself on, gradually calmed down. Nocobotha went about constantly to restore courage. He felt that it was time to come to an end, and he gave Lucaney orders to assemble the chiefs.

"Great chiefs of the great nations," Nocobotha said to them, as soon as they were all collected round the council-fire, "to-morrow, at day-break, Carmen will be attacked on all sides at once. So soon as the town is taken the campaign will be over. Those who recoil are not men, but slaves. Remember that we are fighting for the liberty of our race."

He then informed each chief of the place of his tribe in the assault ; formed a reserve of ten thousand men to support, if necessary, those who gave way, and, after cheering up the ulmens, he dismissed them. So soon as he was alone, he proceeded to Dona Concha's toldo. The young lady gave Lucaney orders to admit him. Dona Concha was talking with her father, who, on receiving her letter, at once hastened to her.

The interior of the toldo was completely altered, for Nocobotha had placed in it furniture carried off from the estancias by the Indians. Externally nothing was changed, but inside it was divided by partitions, and rendered a perfect European residence. Here Concha lived pleasantly enough, honoured by the supreme chief and in the company of her father and Mer edes, who acted as her lady's maid.

The Indians, though somewhat astonished at their great toqui's mode of life, remembered the European education he had received, and did not complain. Was not Nocobotha's hatred of the white men still equally ardent ? Were not his words still full of love for his country at the council-fire ? Was it not he who had directed the invasion and led the tribes on the path of liberty ? Hence, Nocobotha had lost nothing in the opinion of the warriors. He was still their well-beloved chief.

"Is the effervescence of the tribes appeased ?" Dona Concha asked Nocobotha.

"Yes, Heaven be thanked, senorita ; but the man commanding at Carmen is a wild beast. Six thousand men have been killed by poison."

"Oh, it is fearful," the young lady said.

"The whites are accustomed to treat us thus, and poison——"

"Say no more about it, Don Torribio ; it makes me shudder."

"For centuries the whites have been our murderers."

"What do you intend doing ?" Don Valentine asked, in order to turn the conversation.

"To-morrow, senor, a general assault will be made on Carmen."

"To-morrow ?"

"Yes. To-morrow I shall have destroyed the Spaniards' power in Patagonia, or be dead myself."

"God will protect the good cause," Dona Concha said, in a prophetic voice.

A cloud passed over Don Valentine's forehead.

"During the battle, which will be obstinate, I implore you, senorita, not to leave this toldo, before which I will leave twenty men on guard."

"Are you going to leave us already, Don Torribio ?"

"I must ; so excuse me, madam."

"Good-bye, then," Dona Concha said.

"All is over !" Don Valentine murmured, in despair, when Nocobotha had gone out. "They will succeed."

The maiden, who was calm and half smiling, but whose eye was inflamed with hatred, walked up to Don Valentine, clasped her hands on his shoulder, and said, in a whisper—

"Have you read the Bible, father ?"

"Yes ; when I was young."

"Do you remember the history of Samson and Delilah?"

"Do you mean to cut his hair off, then?"

"Do you remember Judith and Holofernes?"

"Then you mean to cut his head off?"

"No, father."

"What mean these strange questions?"

"I love Don Sylvio!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE AGONY OF A TOWN.

ABOUT two in the morning, at the moment when the blue jay struck up its first song, faint as a sigh, Nocobotha, completely armed for war, left his toldo, and proceeded to the centre of the camp. Here the ulmens, apo-ulmens, and caraskens were squatting on their heels round an immense fire, and smoking in silence. All rose on the arrival of the supreme toqui, but at a signal from the master they resumed their seats. Nocobotha then turned to the matchi, who was walking gravely by his side, and to whom he had dictated his orders beforehand.

"Will Gualichu," he asked him, "be neutral, adverse, or favourable in the war of his Indian sons against the pale-faces?"

The sorcerer went up to the fire, and walked round it thrice from left to right, muttering unintelligible words. At the third round he filled a calabash with sacred water contained in closely-plaited reeds, sprinkled the assembly, and threw the rest towards the east. Then, with body half bent and head advanced, he stretched out his arms, and appeared listening to sounds perceptible to himself alone.

On his right hand the blue jay poured forth its plaintive note twice in succession. Suddenly the matchi's face was disfigured by horrible grimaces; his blood-suffused eyes swelled; he turned pale and trembled as if suffering from an ague fit.

"The spirit is coming! the spirit is coming!" the Indians said.

"Silence!" Nocobotha commanded; "the sage is about to speak."

In fact, obeying this indirect order, he whistled guttural sounds between his teeth, among which the broken words could be detected—

"The spirit is marching!" he exclaimed; "he has unfastened his long hair, which floats in the wind; his breath spreads death around. The sky is red with blood! Gualichu, the prince of evil, will not want

for victims. The flesh of the pale-faces serves as a sheath for the knives of the Indians. Do you hear the urubus and vultures in the distance? What a splendid meal they will have! Utter the war-yell! Courage, warriors, Gualichu guides you—death is nothing; glory everything.”

The sorcerer still continued to stammer, and rolled on the ground, suffering from a fit of epilepsy. Then the Indians pitilessly turned away from him, for the man who is so rash as to touch the matchi when the spirit is torturing him would be struck by a sudden death. Such is the Indian belief.

Nocobotha addressed the audience in his turn. “Chiefs of the great nations, as you see, the God of our fathers is with us, and He wishes our land to become free again. The sun, when it sets, must not see a Spanish flag waving in Peru. Courage, brothers! the Aucas, my ancestors, who hunt on the blessed prairies of the Eskennan, will joyfully receive among them those who may fall in battle. Each will proceed to his post! the cry of the urubu, repeated thrice at equal intervals, will be the signal for the assault.”

The chiefs bowed and withdrew.

The night, studded with stars, was calm and imposing. The moon studded with a pale silver the dark blue of the firmament. There was not a breath in the air, not a cloud in the sky; the atmosphere was serene and limpid; nothing disturbed the silence of this splendid night, except the dull, vague murmur which seems on the desert to be the breathing of sleeping Nature.

A thousand varied feelings were confounded in the mind of Nocobotha, who thought of the approaching deliverance of his country and his love for Dona Concha. Then raising his eyes to the star-studded vault of heaven, the Indian fervently implored the Omnipotent to fight on his side. If he had been compelled to choose between his love and the cause he defended, he assuredly would not have hesitated; for the happiness of an individual is as nothing when compared with the liberty of an entire nation.

While the toqui was plunged in these reflections a hand was laid heavily on his shoulder. It was the matchi, who looked at him with his tiger-cat eyes.

“What do you want?” he asked him, drily.

“Is my father satisfied with me? Did Gualichu speak well?”

“Yes,” the chief said, repressing a start of disgust. “Withdraw.”

“My father is great and generous.”

Nocobotha contemptuously threw one of his rich necklaces to the wretched sorcerer, who made a grimace to show his joy.

“Begone!” he said to him.

The matchi, satisfied with his reward, went away. The trade of an Indian sorcerer is a famous one.

“I have the time,” Nocobotha muttered, after calculating the hours by the position of the stars.

He hastily bent his steps towards Dona Concha's toldo.

"She is there," he said to himself; "she is sleeping, lulled by her childish dreams; her lips are opened like a flower to inhale the perfumed breath of night. She is slumbering with her hand upon her heart to defend it. And I love her! Grant, O Heaven, that I may render her happy! Help my arm, which wishes to save a people!"

He went up to a warrior standing at the entrance to the toldo.

"Lucaney," he said, in a voice that was powerfully affected, "I have saved you from death."

"I remember it."

"All I love is in that toldo: I entrust it to you."

"This toldo is sacred, my father."

"Thanks!" Nocobotha said, affectionately pressing the hand of the ulmen, who kissed the hem of his robe.

The ulmens, after the council was over, had drawn up their tribes in readiness for the assault; the warriors, lying down flat on the ground, began one of those astounding marches which Indians alone are capable of undertaking. Gliding and crawling like lizards through the lofty grass, they succeeded, within an hour, in placing themselves unnoticed at the very foot of the entrenchments. This movement had been executed with the refined prudence the Indians display on the war trail. The silence of the prairie had not been disturbed, and the town seemed buried in sleep.

Some minutes, however, before the ulmens received Nocobotha's final orders, a man dressed in the costume of the Aucas, had left the camp before them all, and made his way to Carmen on his hands and knees. On reaching the first barricades he held out his hands to an invisible hand, which hoisted him over the wall.

"Well, Pedrito?"

"We shall be attacked, major, within an hour."

"Is it an assault?"

"Yes; the Indians are afraid of being poisoned like rats, and hence wish to come to an end."

"What is to be done?"

"We must die."

"By Jupiter! that's fine advice."

"We may still try——"

"What?"

"Give me twenty faithful gauchos."

"Take them; and what then?"

"Leave me to act, major. I do not answer for success, as these red demons are as numerous as flies; but I shall certainly kill some of them."

"And the women and children?"

"I have shut them up in the estancia of San Julian."

"Heaven be praised!"

"But, by the way, they will attack the estancia if they take Carmen."

"You're a humbug, Pedrito," the major said, with a smile. "You forget Dona Concha."

"That is true," the bombero remarked, gaily; "I did not think of the

senorita. I also forgot this—the signal for the attack will be an urubu cry, repeated at three equal intervals.”

“Good! I will go and prepare, for I do not expect they will wait for sunrise.”

The major on one side, and the bombero on the other, proceeded from post to post to awake the defenders of the town, and warn them to be on their guard.

On that very evening Major Bloomfield had convened all the inhabitants; and in a short and energetic harangue depicted to them their desperate situation.

“The boats tied up under the guns of the fort,” he said, in conclusion, “are ready to receive the women, children, and any frightened men. They will be removed during the night to the estancia of San Julian.”

The inhabitants stationed themselves behind the barricades with eye and ear on the watch and musket in hand. An hour was spent in watching, when suddenly the hoarse, ill-omened cry of the urubu broke the silence. A second cry followed the first closely, and the last note of the third was still vibrating when the clamour burst forth on all sides simultaneously, and the Indians dashed forward tumultuously to scale the outer entrenchments. They broke against the living wall that rose at the barriers. Astounded by this unexpected resistance, the Indians fell back, and were decimated by the canister, which spread desolation and death among their ranks.

Pedrito, profiting by the panic of the red-skins, dashed after them at the head of his gauchos, and cut them down vigorously.

After two hours of terrific fighting, the sun, disdainful of human contest, majestically rose on the horizon and spread the splendour of its beams over the field of carnage. The Indians saluted its apparition with shouts of joy, and rushed with much rage at the entrenchments—their shock was irresistible.

The colonists fled, pursued by the savages. But a formidable explosion upheaved the ground beneath their feet, and the hapless Indians, hurled into the air, fell dead all around. It was a mine the Argentines had fired.

The Indians, wild with terror, and deaf to the voice of their ulmens, fled, and refused to begin the engagement again.

Nocobotha, mounted on a splendid charger, black as night, dashed forward, almost alone, and waved the sacred totem of the united nations, shouting in a voice heard above the din of battle—

“Cowards who refuse to conquer, at least see me die!”

This cry sounded in the ears of the Indians as a shameful reproach, and they ran after their chief.

Nocobotha appeared invulnerable. He made his horse curvet, rushed into the thickest of the fight, parried every blow with the staff of the totem, which he raised above his head, and shouted to his men—

“Courage, follow me!”

“Nocobotha, the last of the Aucas! let us die for the child of the

sun!" the Indians shouted, electrified by the rash boldness of their toqui.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically pointing to the planet of day, "see! my radiant father smiles on our valour. Forward, forward!"

"Forward!" the warriors repeated, and redoubled their fury.

All the town was already invaded, and the fighting went on from house to house. The Aucas formed in close columns, and, led by Nocobotha, dashed up the eastern steep street that runs to old Carmen and the citadel. They advanced fearlessly, in spite of the incessant fire from the guns of the fort. Nocobotha, respected by death, and ever in front, brandished his totem, and made his black horse rear.

"Well," Major Bloomfield said, mournfully, to Pedrito, "the hour has arrived."

"Do you wish it, major?"

"I insist on it."

"That is enough," the bombero added. "Good-bye, major, till we meet again in another world."

The two men shook hands: it was a final leave-taking, for, unless a miracle occurred, they were about to die. After this farewell Pedrito collected fifty horsemen, formed them into a close squadron, and between two discharges from the battery, they dashed at full speed upon the ascending Indians. The red-skins opened right and left before this avalanche that rushed down the mountain; and they had scarce recovered from their stupor ere they perceived the Spanish horsemen in three boats, pulling out to sea with all their might.

Taking advantage of this bold diversion, all the colonists, by Major Bloomfield's direction, shut themselves up in the fort.

Nocobotha made the Aucas a sign to halt, and advanced alone up to the walls of the citadel.

"Major," he shouted, in a firm voice, "surrender; you and your men will be allowed to live."

"You are a traitor and a dog," the major, who at once appeared, answered.

"You are warned, you and your men."

"I will not surrender."

Twenty bullets whistled from the top of the wall, but Nocobotha had returned to his warriors with the rapidity of an arrow.

"Back, back," he shouted to them.

A detonation, loud as a hundred peals of thunder, rent the air. The major had blown up the powder in the fortress. The stony giant oscillated for two or three seconds on its base like an intoxicated mastodon; then, suddenly torn from the ground, it rose in the air, and burst like an over-ripe pomegranate, amid expiring cries of "Long live our country!"

A shower of stones and horridly mutilated corpses fell on the terrified Indians.

All was over. Nocobotha was master of the ruins of Carmen.

Weeping with rage on seeing this disastrous victory, he planted his totem on a piece of tottering wall, which was the only relic of the fort and its defenders.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LAST OF THE AUCAS.

THE principal houses of the town were only spared from pillage; and Nocobotha, in order to save their riches, granted them to the most powerful chiefs. As for himself, he established his head-quarters in his own mansion in old Carmen. Don Valentine and his daughter took possession of their house, which had escaped the fury of the Indians.

The town offered an image of desolation.

A week after the capture of the colony, at about ten in the morning, three persons were conversing in a low voice in Don Valentine's saloon. They were Don Valentine himself, his daughter, and the capataz. The latter, in his gaucho dress, had the look of a thorough bandit. Mercedes, standing as sentry at a window, was laughing heartily at him, to the great despair of the capataz, who most sincerely wished his confounded disguise at the deuce.

"Blas, my friend," Don Valentine was saying, "get yourself ready for a dance."

"Then the ceremony is to take place to-day?"

"Yes, Blas. I must confess that we live in singular times, and a singular country. I have seen several revolutions, but this one beats them all."

"From the Indian point of view," Concha said, "it is very logical."

"Which of you, a month ago, expected such a sudden re-establishment of the empire of the Aucas?"

"Not I," the capataz replied. "Still, it seems to me that Nocobotha is not at all magnanimous for a future emperor."

"What do you mean by that, my friend?"

"Has he not written to Don Sylvio that, if he does not leave the colony in three days, he will have him hung?"

"Before hanging people," said Dona Concha, "it is necessary to catch them."

"All that is very fine, Blas, but you will return to the estancia. Above all, do not forget my instructions."

"Trust to me for that, excellency; but I am anxious about Pedrito," he added, in a low voice, not to be overheard by Mercedes; "he has

disappeared for the last six days, and we have heard nothing about him."

"Don Pedro," Concha remarked, "is not the man to be lost without leaving traces. Reassure yourself we shall see him again."

"Nocobotha!" Mercedes exclaimed, turning round.

"Blas, my friend, decamp," Don Valentine said.

"Come again soon," Mercedes added.

Nocobotha walked in. The great chief of the Aucas, dressed in his magnificent Indian costume, had a thoughtful brow and anxious look. After the first compliment, Dona Concha, alarmed by the chief's gloomy appearance, bent forward gracefully to him, and said, with an affectionate air, which was admirably assumed—

"What is the matter with you, Torribio; you seem troubled? Have you received any unpleasant news?"

"No, madam, I thank you. If I were really ambitious, all my wishes would be fulfilled. The chiefs have resolved on re-establishing the empire of the Aucas, and they have elected me, who am the direct heir, to succeed the unfortunate Athahualpa; but——"

"They have done you justice."

"This distinction terrifies me, and I fear I cannot bear the weight of an empire. The wounds dealt my race by the Spaniards are old and deep. The Indians have been brutalised by a long servitude. What a task it is to command these disunited tribes! Who will carry on my work if I die in twenty years, two years, to-morrow, perhaps? What will become of the dream of my life?"

"Heaven means you to live long, Don Torribio," Dona Concha answered.

"A diadem on my brow! Stay, senorita: I am discouraged, weary of life; it seems to me that the crown will press my temples like a band of iron, and crush them, and that I shall be buried in my triumph!"

"Dismiss these vain presentiments," the girl remarked, giving a side glance full of meaning.

"As you know, madam, the Tarpeian Rock is close to the Capitol."

"Come, come, Don Torribio," Don Valentine said, gaily; "let us take our places."

A splendid breakfast had been laid. The first moments passed in silence. The guests seemed embarrassed, but by degrees, thanks to Dona Concha's efforts, the conversation became more animated. Nocobotha, it could be easily seen, was making a violent effort to drive back the flood of thoughts that ran to his lips. Towards the end of the repast he turned to the young lady.

"Senorita," he said, "this evening all will be over. I shall be emperor, and sworn enemy of the Spaniards, who will doubtless return with arms in their hands to overthrow our empire. What they most dread in an Indian insurrection is the reprisals, that is to say, the massacre of the white men. My marriage with you is a pledge of peace for your countrymen, and a security for their commerce. Dona Concha, give me your hand."

"What hurry is there at this moment, Don Torribio?" she asked. "Are you not sure of me?"

"Ever the same vague and obscure answer," the chief said, with a frown. "Child, you are playing with a lion, and I see to the bottom of your heart. Imprudent girl, you are rushing on your own destruction; but you are in my power; and after saving your life ten times I offer you half a throne. To-morrow, madam, you will and must marry me. Your father's and Don Sylvio's heads will answer for your obedience."

And seizing a crystal bottle full of limpid water, he filled his glass to the brim, and emptied it at a draught, while Dona Concha gazed at him fixedly; this look contained a cruel and concealed joy.

"In an hour," he added, as he placed the glass on the table again, "you will be present at the ceremony by my side; I insist on it."

"I will be there," she replied.

"Farewell, madam."

The young lady rose quickly, seized the bottle, and walked up to the window.

"What are you going to do there?" Don Valentine asked.

"I am watering my flowers, father."

While pouring out the water, Concha, whose eyes sparkled with a gloomy fire, muttered to herself—

"Don Torribio, you told me one day that there's many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip; well, listen to me in my turn; between your forehead and a crown there is death."

She then placed two flower-pots near the balustrade on the terrace of the house. This was doubtless a signal, for in a few minutes Mercedes entered the saloon hurriedly, saying—

"He is here."

"Let him come in," Don Valentine and his daughter said, simultaneously.

Pedrito made his appearance. The estanciero recommended the utmost vigilance to Mercedes, closed the door, and then seated himself by the bombero's side.

"Well?" he asked him.

The Plaza Mayor on this day offered an unexpected sight. In the centre rose a tall scaffold covered with red velvet tapestry, on which a chair of carved nopal wood was placed. The back was surmounted by a massive gold sun flashing with diamonds; a vulture of the Andes, the sacred bird of the Aucas, also of gold, held in its bent beak an imperial crown, while in its claws it had a sceptre terminating in a trident, and a hand of justice holding a dazzling sun. This vulture, with outstretched wings, seemed hovering over the chair, to which there was an ascent of four steps. On the right of this chair was another, somewhat lower, but more simple.

At mid-day, the moment when the day-star at its zenith darts forth all its beams, five cannon-shots, fired at regular intervals, boomed forth majestically. At the same moment the different tribes debouched through each of the entrances of the square, led by their ulmen, and

dressed in their robes of state. Only five thousand warriors were assembled, for, according to the Indian custom, as soon as Carmen was taken, the booty was sent under safe escort to the mountains, and the troops disbanded and returned to their *tolderias*, ready to come back, however, on the first signal.

The tribes drew up on three sides, leaving the fourth vacant, which was soon occupied by five hundred *gauchos*. The latter were mounted and well armed, while the Indians were on foot, and had only their machetes in their girdles. The windows were lined with spectators, behind whom Indian women, irregularly grouped, thrust out their heads over their shoulders.

The centre of the square was free. In front of the scaffolding, and at the foot of a clumsy altar shaped like a table, with a deep gutter running down it and a sun above it, stood the great *matchi* and twenty priests, all with their arms crossed and their eyes fixed on the ground.

When all had taken their places five more gunshots were fired, and a brilliant cavalcade came up. Nocobotha, who marched at their head, with Dona Cocha on his right and Don Valentine on his left, held his totem in his hand. After them came the principal *ulmens* and *caras-kens* of the united nations with their brilliant ornaments of gold and precious stones.

Nocobotha got off his horse, held out his hand to Dona Concha to help her to dismount, mounted the scaffold, led her to the second chair, and himself stopped before the first one, though without sitting down. His ordinary pale features were inflamed, his eyes seemed swollen by watching, and he incessantly wiped away the perspiration that stood on his forehead. Something unusual was going on within him. Dona Concha's pallor was extreme, but her face was tranquil.

The *ulmens* surrounded the scaffold, and at a third cannonade, the priests stepped on one side and displayed a securely-bound man lying on the ground in their midst. The *matchi* turned to the crowd.

"All you who listen to me : The sun, our ancestor, has smiled on our arms, and Gualichu himself fought for us. The empire of the Aucas is established, the Indians are free, and the supreme chief of the Patagonian nation, Nocobotha, is about to place on his head the diadem of Athahualpa. In the name of the new emperor and ourselves we are about to offer to the sun, from whom he is descended, the most grateful of all sacrifices. Priests, bring up the victim."

The priests laid the unhappy wretch in the trough of the altar. He was a colonist made prisoner at the taking of Poblacion del Sur; indeed, the *pulpero* in whose shop the *gauchos* were accustomed to drink their *chica*.

In the meanwhile Nocobotha trembled as if smitten with ague. He had a buzzing in his ears; his temples beat violently, and his eyes were suffused with blood. He supported himself on one of the arms of his chair.

"What is the matter?" Dona Concha asked him.

"I do not know," he answered; "the heat, the excitement, perhaps—I am stifling. I hope it will be nothing."

The unfortunate prisoner had been stripped of all his clothes, with the exception of his trousers, and he uttered heart-rending cries. The matchi approached him, brandishing his knife.

"Oh, it is frightful!" Dona Concha exclaimed, burying her face in her hands.

"Silence!" Nocobotha murmured; "it must be. There is no help for it."

The matchi, insensible to the yells of the victim, selected the spot where he was to strike, looked at the day star with an inspired air, raised his knife, and laid open the pulpero's chest. Then, while the victim writhed in agony, and the priests collected the blood which poured in a stream, the matchi plucked out his heart, and held it up to the sun, like the host in Catholic churches.

At this moment all the ulmens mounted the scaffold, and seating Nocobotha on the throne, raised him on their shoulders, shouting enthusiastically—

"Long live the new emperor! long live the son of the sun!"

The priests sprinkled the crowd with the blood of the victim, and the Indians filled the air with deafening shouts.

At length Nocobotha exclaimed, "I have restored the empire of the Aucas, and freed my race!"

"Not yet!" Dona Concha said to him, triumphantly. "Look!"

The gauchos, who had hitherto been impassive spectators of the ceremony, suddenly dashed at a gallop upon the defenceless Indians, while through all the streets poured regular troops, who had arrived from Buenos Ayres, and all the windows were lined with white men, who fired at the mob. In the centre of the square could be recognised Don Sylvio d'Arenal, Blas Sallazar, Pedrito and his two brothers, who pitilessly massacred the Indians with shouts of "Exterminate the pagans!"

"Oh!" Nocobotha exclaimed, brandishing his totem with a trembling hand, "what treachery!"

He tried to fly to the help of his people, but he tottered and fell on his knees; his eyes were covered by an ensanguined mist; a devouring fire burnt his entrails. "What is the matter?" he asked himself in despair.

"You are dying, Don Torribio," Dona Concha whispered in his ear, as she seized his arm forcibly.

"Woman, you lie," he said, striving to rise. "I will help my brothers."

"Your brothers are being slaughtered; did you not mean to kill my father, my affianced husband, and myself? Die, villain! die by a woman's hand! I love Don Sylvio—do you hear me?—and I am avenged."

"Woe, woe!" Nocobotha shrieked, dragging himself on his knees to the edge of the platform, "I am the murderer of a people I wished to save."

But his strength was rapidly failing, and the mighty Nocobotha was now as powerless for either good or evil as the ensanguined corpses of the Indians that were lying around the scaffold.

Dona Concha's eyes flashed upon him—a flash of triumph mingled with pity.

In the meantime the white men, urged on by their leaders, continued the pitiless massacre of the entrapped, surprised, and disorganised Indians.

Don Torribio, his fierce spirit struggling for the mastery over his physical weakness, seemed for a moment to regain a transitory vigour.

Rising from his knees, he staggered feebly to his feet, drew his trembling hand across his failing eyes, and looked sadly around him.

The Indians were falling like ripe corn before the sickle of the reapers. It was no longer a combat, but a butchery. Several chiefs flying before Pedrito, the capataz, and Don Sylvio rushed to the platform as a last refuge.

Here they gathered closely around their leader to make their final stand.

All, however, was useless.

Pedrito, the capataz, and Don Sylvio, mercilessly cutting down all before them, sprang upon the platform, followed by the bravest of their men.

Don Sylvio, with one glance of blended love and admiration at his devoted Concha, rushed towards Nocobotha, waving his sword and shouting—

“Death to the traitor.”

“Oh!” Nocobotha howled, as he took a tiger bound and seized Don Sylvio by the throat, “I too will revenge myself.”

There was a moment of terrible anxiety.

Every one on the scaffold held back his weapon in suspense.

Dona Concha, with hands clasped and eyes raised to heaven, uttered, in a tone of concentrated supplication, the words—

“Oh, save him.”

“No,” the chief added, letting loose his enemy and falling back; “it would be cowardly, for this man has done me no injury.”

Dona Concha, on hearing these words, could not restrain tears of admiration, tardy tears; tears of repentance, or of love, perhaps! She half-repented her part in the tragedy now taking place.

But it was too late.

Nocobotha lay upon the scaffold that was to have been the scene of his glory, enveloped in the trappings of barbaric splendour.

The vital spark was now but faintly flickering.

Pedrito fired his rifle into the chest of the chief, who was lying stretched out at his feet. At the same instant Pincheira fell, his head cleft asunder by Don Sylvio. Don Valentine, struck by a straggling bullet, sank into his disconsolate daughter's arms.

"My God," Nocobotha murmured, "you will judge me!" He looked up to heaven, moved his lips again as if in prayer, and suddenly his countenance became radiant; he fell back and expired.

"Perhaps this man's cause was just," Dona Concha said, overwhelmed with remorse.

It is not the first time that a woman has, through the decree of Heaven, arrested a conqueror.

FIN

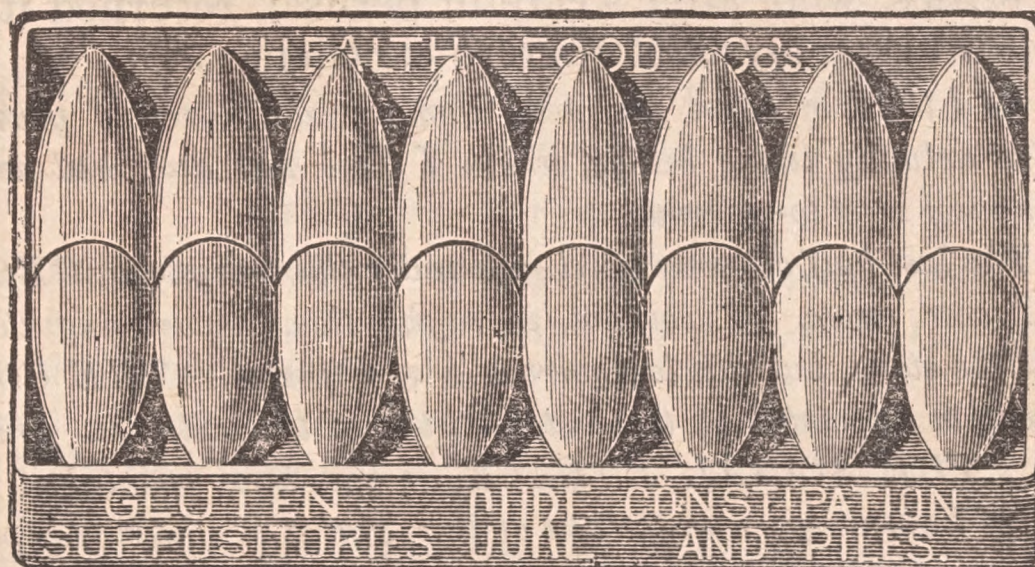
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